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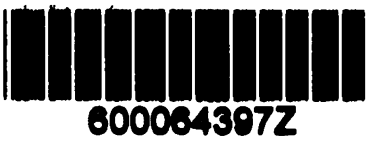
MOLLIE DARLING.

BY

LADY CONSTANCE HOWARD.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MOLLIE DARLING.

A Novel.

BY

LADY CONSTANCE HOWARD,
AUTHOR OF 'SWEETHEART AND WIFE,' ETC., ETC.

'I must leave you, Mollie darling,
Tho' the parting gives me pain;
When the stars shine, Mollie darling,
I will meet you here again.

Oh! good-night, Mollie, good-bye, loved one,
Happy may you ever be.
When you're dreaming, Mollie darling,
Don't forget to dream of me.

Mollie, fairest, sweetest, dearest,
Look up, darling, tell me this—
Do you love me, Mollie darling?
Let your answer be a kiss.'

W. S. HAYES.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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MOLLIE DARLING.

CHAPTER I.

CONSTANT AND TRUE.

'However small the talent be
By each of us possessed,
Oh! let us use it faithfully,
And strive to do the best.'

H. G. A.

'Proud-pied April, dress'd in all his train,
Hath put a spirit of youth in everything.'

Sonnet xcviii.

ONCE again the old year has given place to the new. Christmas is a time consecrated to the past. It is the beginning of the April following Geoffrey's death and Sir Villiers'.

The winter has, indeed, been a sad one to

Mollie. More than ever has she been left alone; and what makes everything worse is the fact that poverty is coming upon Mollie and Fitzroy with the stride of a giant that wears seven-leagued boots.

Mollie and Fitzroy and Robin are still in the house in Kensington. One thing after another has gone; one servant after another they have been obliged to part with, until only those absolutely necessary remain.

Clifford is still faithful to her post, and to her other manifold duties has added yet this one more, looking after Robin, who is growing fast, and who is rapidly becoming a most charming child. A lovely one he has been always.

The insanity of Sir Fitzroy for Circe has, if anything, increased. Lord Mark remains faithful to his friendship for Mollie, and sees with real sorrow the hardness of the life that has fallen to the share of the one person in the world he would so gladly shield from all trouble and bother. But,

except by sympathy, he is absolutely powerless, for the barrier between him and happiness is one that cannot be set aside.

What would become of Mollie were it not for Lord Mark? she often wonders; and in the long night hours, when the minutes are so full of the cherished past which will never be hers again, she dwells gratefully upon the thought that he has indeed proved himself to be the friend on whom, at all times and places, she could so implicitly trust. Well has he justified the faith that Geoffrey reposed in him; and she thanks God for this, the brightest spot in such a sorrowful life as hers.

No one in this world can replace Geoffrey to her, for the affection between him and Mollie had indeed been a rare and perfect one, so perfect that, lest she should make an idol of him, God had taken Geoffrey away from her, from 'the evil to come.'

No doubt we do sometimes love a human being so entirely, that all other thought is

for the time being non-existent; thus we render it necessary, for their sake and ours, that a separation should ensue, or we should go on leading a life in time that would unfit us for eternity. Well does Keble say:

'For if one heart in perfect sympathy
Beat with another, answering love for love,
Weak mortals, all entranc'd, on earth would lie,
Nor listen for those purer strains above.'

It is one of those days in early April that in England are so trying to everyone. The winter has not yet made up its mind to depart; consequently people do not know how to dress, and what to do with themselves generally. It is just such a day as the famous one described by the Yankee in his three weeks in the 'Old Country.' Most of us can unhappily bear witness to the fact that the description was by no means exaggerated. On the contrary, his views were rather complimentary than otherwise. He observes: 'First it blew, and then it snew, and then it thew, and

then it friz, and then it rained most horrid.' A most graphic and excellent description.

So thought Mollie, on just such a day as this, as she sat in her drawing-room leaning her aching head upon her hand, and absorbed in meditation, which, to judge by her expression, was not of the pleasantest, most cheery nature.

She had not been there very long when Clifford came in.

'Oh, my lady,' said Clifford; 'still poring over those dreadful bills?'

'Yes,' answers Mollie, sighing. 'And what is more, they seem to get worse, instead of better, the more I pore over them.'

'I dare say they do,' answers Clifford feelingly. 'Your poor head must ache.'

'That it undoubtedly does,' replies Mollie, trying to smile, and not scoring a great success in that line. 'I do think,' she goes on, 'that poverty, in whatever aspect it comes, is always sad to witness, hard to

bear—above all, when one is powerless to help those who are thus sorely afflicted; but I really think in some ways the worst is that which falls to the lot of many people who, up to a certain epoch, have been in the enjoyment of all wealth could give them. Often, through no fault of their own, things go completely wrong, until at last all they have been accustomed to has to be given up; nothing remains but the memory of the comforts of the past.'

'Such is your case, my lady,' answers Clifford.

'Yes,' says Mollie simply. 'I wonder whether it will always be so?'

'I hope not, indeed,' says Clifford. 'But if it should be so always, we shall get on somehow. You will bear it well, my lady, as you have up to now.'

'Well,' says Mollie, smiling, 'at any rate, you, Clifford, do really believe in me and my work.'

'I should think I did!' answers Clifford.

'Don't I see you all day, and know how you slave, not only in the day, but often at night, when by right you ought to be asleep ?'

'Never mind, Clifford,' says Mollie quietly; 'I must work for Fitzroy and Robin. You know,' she continued, 'I must work. Without that, now I have lost Geoff and my father, I could not exist. I need employment now more than I ever did, more than words can express; it is part and parcel of me. My thoughts and ideas must have vent, if not by one way, then by another, and painting and writing are the way mine go, and they will, I hope, bring "grist to the mill."'

'They ought to,' says Clifford; 'for without you, my lady, and your work, we should not have a roof over our heads.'

'All the better that I can and will work,' answers brave Mollie. 'I feel like a horse that has settled into its stride, when the gallant animal's rider hears the cheery

"Gone away!" that he or she has been waiting and longing for. Then, a straight line of country in front of you, and hedges and ditches and other obstacles become mere child's play. This is what I feel: all the puppets are in position, and they shall answer to the wire that my pen will pull.'

'If anyone can succeed, you will, my lady,' says the constant Clifford.

A knock was heard; and on answering it, Clifford found that Lord Mark was waiting to know if Lady L'Estrange was at home.

'I should think so!' answered Mollie. 'Show him up, please.'

Accordingly, Lord Mark walked quickly upstairs.

'Well, Lord Mark,' says Mollie, smiling; 'I am glad to see you.'

'I return you the compliment tenfold,' replies Lord Mark with his pleasant smile; 'but,' he adds, 'I am very sorry to see you looking so far from well. Is anything wrong?'

'Nothing more than usual,' answers Mollie.

'Always the same, money troubles?' asks Lord Mark.

'Yes,' says Mollie.

'I do wish Fitzroy would let me help him,' says Lord Mark, almost crossly.

'I thank you a thousand times!' replies Mollie; 'but,' she adds with dignity, 'such a thing cannot be.'

'Why won't you let me act a friend's part?' asks Lord Mark.

'Because,' replies Mollie, 'you are too true a friend for anything of the kind. What says Hamlet? "Loan oft loses both itself and friend;" and,' she adds, 'I could not bear that, for without your friendship I should be lost indeed.'

'Would you?' asks Lord Mark, with a glad light in his eyes.

'Indeed I should be!' says Mollie; 'therefore let there be no question of the "root of all evil" between us two.'

'As you like,' replies Lord Mark; 'your will, Lady L'Estrange, is my law always.'

Mollie was not one of those who sit down quietly under misfortune, no matter how heavy, and let their troubles overwhelm them; on the contrary, like all very ambitious natures, Mollie would not be conquered. 'Invicta' was her motto—that of her beloved county—and well she acted up to it. She had gleams of brightness, such as always fall to the lot of ambitious and energetic natures. But this particular day Mollie was very desponding: everything had gone wrong.

'Oh, the curse of poverty!' said Mollie; 'for there is no other word than curse which in any way conveys a real sense of what poverty is. How, for the sake of the few wretched pounds which help to eke out a miserable existence for ourselves and those who are dear to and dependent upon us, we are forced to toil and slave. Not that toiling and slaving would matter,' Mollie

adds; 'on the contrary, for all are better for honest work, and no bread is so sweet as that gained by the sweat of one's brow, the labour of one's hands and brains. But when poverty is a curse is the day when one has to put up with and tolerate insolence from those who possess the pounds where we lack the pence; and to earn the pounds we must perforce accept the impertinence and ill-treatment they think good enough for those who unluckily—God knows!—have to work for their living, and who are dependent upon the scant courtesy of those who ought to know better, and who should treat them properly. Heaven help the woman whose lot in life is to work with and for such brutes as these! The term is deserved by those who try to crush all womanhood, purity, and every atom and vision of hope out of those who so sorely need help!'

'If only I might help you, dear Lady L'Estrange,' says Lord Mark—'nay, do

not be angry,' he continues, seeing the expression on Mollie's face; 'I was not going to repeat my former observation, for I know that is a forbidden subject; but while it is still in my head, only let me say this—that I shall do all I can to get work for Fitzroy, and that you must promise me one thing faithfully.'

'What is that?' asks Mollie.

'A very simple thing,' answers Lord Mark, smiling; 'only this—promise me that if, in the future, things in the money line go wrong, you will let me then act by you the part of a brother. I know I cannot hope to supply dear old Geoff's place really in any way, but you must let me try. Remember, Lady L'Estrange, he told you to look upon me as a friend, and I do hope you will let me be that to you always.'

'I promise,' whispers Mollie softly; 'and I do look upon you as the best and truest friend any woman ever had. You

have proved it in a hundred ways since I have known you, and more than ever since my darling's death. You don't know how deeply and truly I appreciate your kindnes and friendship.' And ominous signs of weeping appear in Mollie's bright eyes.

Seeing this, Lord Mark comes and sits on the sofa beside Mollie, and hastens to alter the tone of the conversation.

'Where is my beloved Robin?' he asks.

'Having his bath, I think,' answers Mollie, wiping away her tears. 'What a goose I am to cry!' she continues. 'I ought to be ashamed of myself. Instead of weeping, I think I will make a list of my friends, my "comforts," as I call them. It won't take me long; for, do you know, Lord Mark, you are the only person who ever comes to see me. I suppose if one is poor, and not able to return civilities, that people's memories become most conveniently short. "Out of sight, out of mind," is the motto of the fashionable world of the nineteenth

century. However, I will begin. First, one Lord Mark Champion, my trusty knight and very good friend, whose friendship and companionship is dear to me for his own sake, and because he is Geoff's legacy to me. Secondly, one Robin L'Estrange, the embodiment of fascination and mischief, my darling little one! Thirdly, one Clifford, trusty, devoted, unselfish, untiring, never weary in well-doing; one—oh dear!' suddenly exclaims Mollie, while this time the tears, that will not be denied their prerogative any longer, chase each other swiftly down her pale cheeks. 'I can't, I can't go on; my description of my few friends reminded me so much of darling Geoff's summing up of my charms, that I can't say another word.' And then, a veritable picture of Niobe, poor Mollie relates, for Lord Mark's benefit, poor Geoffrey's characteristic catalogue of her powers of captivation.

'You are so like him in everything, Lady L'Estrange,' says Lord Mark; 'to look at

you, and hear you talking, is like seeing and hearing Geoff again.'

'I am so glad,' replies Mollie, smiling the faintest, wettest little smile. Those long lashes which veil her glorious eyes are all pearled with dew, relics of the tears she has shed over her heart-breaking recollections of Geoffrey, he who had made her all in this life.

And then these two fall to recalling every word of Geoffrey's that they have kept and garnered in the storehouse of their faithful memories. Nothing is heard but 'Do you remember?' and 'Don't you recollect?' as the reminiscences are rapidly recalled.

In such conversations and days as these does Mollie find all the brightness of which her life is still capable. That she has an enormous amount of loving in her, and consequently a parallel amount of keen suffering, has been already distinctly shown by her love for Geoffrey and her husband, Sir Villiers and Robin. The love has been

given, and those on whom she lavished it have been taken away from her. The suffering still remains, and shows every prospect of a long, unchecked, and most prosperous career.

Mollie has loved, also she has lost; it does not seem probable that, under existing circumstances, Sir Fitzroy will ever alter to her; she has Lord Mark, Robin, and Clifford on whom she may bestow genuine liking, and, in the case of Robin, love. But, as things are, it seems most probable that all the love of which such a nature as Mollie's is capable will have to be pent up in the past; there is no outlet for it rightly in the present, or probably in the future.

It is an awful, a terrible life to condemn any young, joyous woman, with a capability of intense love in her, to lead; for what does it really mean?

It means this: days of heart and soul loneliness; of unceasing work for those who ought to work for you; of absolute

isolation from all that should make a good, pure life replete with the joys ordained by God and nature; absence of the smallest, most innocent enjoyments that ought to fall to the lot of every human being one time or another; soul loneliness (as far as human beings are concerned); heart desolation (a very abomination of desolation); eyes that weep for the joys which they have a right to gaze upon, but which they have never grasped for one real moment—nay, scarcely in their happiest dreams; for companions, books, work of all kinds (the saving from madness of cases such as these): such is the fate of many women who keep to what is pure and right, who are looked upon by those who ought to cherish them as mere automatons, without human feelings, human passions and longings, and who never hardly have the hand of friendship held out to them—never that of love, for marriage has precluded that for ever.

The husbands of these sad women do not

value the slaves they have bought with, sometimes, only a golden ring, sometimes with the manifold good things of this world; they look upon them as good to care for their children and homes, but as for love and sympathy, they do not think that it is at all necessary for them to have them. Yet these women often long for the love which is legally theirs (it is so sad always to be alone); and to some in this world even that is denied—they must sin, or be for ever alone.

Oh, husbands! think twice before you carelessly and from absolute indifference put in your wives' way that which may make 'a stumbling-block.' Every woman is not strong to resist always; perpetual pleading will charm the heart out of most women; as it is not good for man to be alone, no more is it for woman, and where ten women overcome, fifty go headlong to the doom which in all probability they would never have known had it not been for your wanton and culpable neglect.

If you have bad wives, you console yourselves, not with one, but many, as the fancy takes you; while your wives must not even glance to the right or left, or they forfeit for ever their place and character and good name in the world of which 'Mrs. Grundy' is the acknowledged and powerful head.

Such a life, alas! as this is Mollie's; but she bears it without complaint, and only works all the harder, with more energy and determination. Mollie has the most wonderful stock of vitality, of hope; and if the smallest thing goes right, the least pleasure falls to her share, she enjoys it like a child of five years old would do. It is this which makes her life endurable still, and lends to her face the happiness and content which it still retains.

'How is the book progressing?' asks Lord Mark.

'Like the tortoise of immortal memory,' laughs Mollie, 'slow and sure.'

'You have promised that you will go to my friend about its publication, Lady L'Estrange,' says Lord Mark.

'And I will,' answers Mollie; 'only you must go with me.'

'With pleasure,' replies Lord Mark. 'When shall we go?'

'Very soon,' says Mollie; 'it will not take long to finish now.'

Once more restored to hope by Lord Mark's cheery words, Mollie bids him good-bye, and goes to dress for the solemn meal with her husband, by courtesy called 'dinner,' at which she finds all the ideas, and conversation too.

CHAPTER II.

NO REWARD.

'Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel.'
Romeo and Juliet.

'Sometimes I think
We cannot walk together in this world!
The distance that divides us is too great!'
LONGFELLOW: *Spanish Student.*

THE days went by much as usual. Sir Fitzroy did not alter his ways of going on; Circe's influence over him continued unabated. What would be the end of it all?

Mollie tried not to think about it; she redoubled her gentleness and care for her husband in every way. If Mollie could win him back, she would, though it is certain that the great love she had borne him

in the early days of their acquaintance and married life had much diminished, in consequence of his treatment of her and his neglect.

Mollie was but human—she had faults like other people—and for her love to have continued unchanged, in the face of such a life as hers, would have been little short of a miracle; it must needs suffer and lose its footing in such an existence.

Lucky for Sir Fitzroy that he had such a wife as Mollie; no one else, assuredly, would have behaved as she had done. Perhaps in some things it would have been better for such a nature as Sir Fitzroy's if he had possessed a shrew for a wife—it might have brought him to his senses; but for very long Mollie had been too yielding: she had allowed the love for her husband, that she had once possessed, to colour her life and conduct too much; she had given in a great deal too much—always a mistake, for women should main-

tain a proper amount of dignity; and, as might be expected with a man like Sir Fitzroy, he had failed to see and appreciate Mollie's motives; he had been indifferent, and simply forgot her altogether. This was the sole reward she had for her pains. All the same, her line of conduct had been the right one; and, secure in that knowledge, she could afford to wait, she could manage to support her life and many troubles.

To Mollie's nature, the consolations that other women would have taken as a matter of course, under similar circumstances, were simply an impossibility; it was no credit to her that it could be so, for such opinions were part and parcel of herself.

One morning, about a month after Mollie had retailed Geoffrey's catalogue of her charms for Lord Mark's benefit, she was sitting in her drawing-room, busy with her book. She was vainly endeavouring to write, for the noise outside was simply dis-

tracting. Just when she was about to give it up in despair, Lord Mark was announced.

'Just in time!' said Mollie, smiling, as she shook hands with him; 'I was on the verge of tearing out my last remaining hairs in sheer despair at the utter impossibility of stringing two ideas together in this horrible noise.'

'Has it been extra bad?' asked Lord Mark sympathisingly.

'I will relate it for your benefit,' laughed Mollie, 'and then you shall give me an unprejudiced opinion. Listen with all your might: this is a specimen of the delights of Kensington. To begin, energetic beating of more than usually well-worn, extremely dirty carpets, specimens from Indian to Axminster; frantic organs pealing forth "Over the Garden Wall," which merges into a hymn, then into "St. Patrick's Day;" determined pianoforte performer, trying over new pieces, with every element but that of success, quarrel-

ling with the piano over "The Dead March." With all her struggles (for it is a woman of awful aspect who murders the music), she has never yet succeeded in getting upon "speaking," or rather "playing, terms" with the piano—much less on intimate terms; the latter is a consummation devoutly to be desired, for familiarity breeds contempt, and if this constant worshipper at the shrine of St. Cecilia could once catch the tune, no doubt she would soon tire of it, as folks do of all else in this world—then wind blowing, dust flying, children yelling, scales resounding, people screaming every description of street-cry, in a word—pandemonium let loose; and, with it all, bread to earn to fill hungry mouths, and keep from the door "duns," like ravening wolves, and, to crown all, a three-volume novel to write, I maintain that even "Job" would have lost his much-extolled patience under the quarter of an infliction such as this;' and

Mollie stops, perfectly exhausted with the lengthened flow of her own eloquence.

'Well,' exclaims Lord Mark, as well as he can for laughing, 'I never heard such a catalogue of miseries! One of them would be enough to qualify most people for a nearer acquaintance with the comforts of Hanwell, but the whole regiment of them, as Toole would say, "Family it is too much;"' and Lord Mark holds out a hand of sympathy to Mollie in her misfortunes.

'Seriously, though,' continues Mollie, 'how am I to write in this noise?—it is quite impossible to fix one's attention!'

'I really do not know what is to be done!' replies Lord Mark.

'I shall give up writing altogether, I think,' says Mollie; 'what with the racket, and other bothers and troubles, it is impossible to have a connected idea. Besides,' Mollie continues, 'for one woman who succeeds in literature or art, thousands drag

on to a weary end—a nameless, fameless existence. Nothing hurts a woman like want of success—nothing is so depressing; and equally, on the other hand, nothing kills a woman's character and good name so often, so quickly, and so surely, as success.'

'In what way do you mean?' asks Lord Mark.

'In this way,' answers Mollie. 'If a woman achieves literary or artistic success, she becomes more or less talked about—the chances are that she then becomes inordinately vain—she thinks that she has only to paint or write, and the world will fall down and worship at her shrine; and, from being a quiet member of society, she assumes all the airs and graces of a public character, and, in the name of, and under the guise of, the success which is hers, she permits herself to do things which, had her efforts been a failure, she would never have dreamt of perpetrating.

If, in addition to all this, she is beautiful, or even tolerably endowed with good looks, she immediately thinks that she is irresistible—that she is a beauty—and expects every man she sees to fall in love with her. She is not content unless every woman's lover forgets his sworn allegiance and succumbs to her fascination; and when she takes her "walks abroad," she expects that, like in the days of "The Gunnings," the people will stand on chairs and stools to look at her as she passes; and that nothing less than a regular "body-guard" will be equal to the Herculean task of conducting her safely home again. No! success for nine women out of ten is a fatal mistake—their heads are not strong enough to stand it—the intoxication is too subtle and insinuating for them, and they are conquered by their own talents at once and for ever. After that, probably their characters go; and one day, when the gilt has worn off the gingerbread, they awake, not

as Byron did, "to find themselves famous," but to regret that they ever were famous, even for a short day.'

'In spite of all this,' says Lord Mark, 'you, Lady L'Estrange, have elected to follow this very career; and unless I am much mistaken in you, you will never stop working until you have succeeded.'

'Quite right,' replies sweet Mollie. 'I am like many others—I am afraid I preach, but I don't practise; I have made up my mind to do certain things to earn a certain income, and I mean to succeed in my task!'

'Yes,' answers Lord Mark, 'I have seen that plainly. The more nearly defeated you seem to be, the more dogged is your determination to win.'

'Yes,' answers Mollie, 'it may be, probably will be, years before I achieve the success I crave for; but by God's help and with health and strength, come what may, I will win renown.'

Such characters as these are rare in the race that is won and lost in the world every minute of the three hundred and sixty-five days that constitute a year; especially scarce are they among women.

'You have my best wishes, Lady L'Estrange,' says Lord Mark softly; 'and what is more, I think you have the element of success in you. Certainly, such energy, pluck, and devotion as yours ought to be rewarded.'

'Sometimes,' replies Mollie, 'I do feel so melancholy, so despairing, it seems as if nothing I do goes right. Far stupider people —excuse my vanity, it is the first sign of what we were talking about just now, madness—succeed; they arrive at the winning-post, while I am left at the starting-post. Why is this?'

'Because,' answers Lord Mark, 'you could not condescend to the tricks and subterfuges that many people would think nothing of; that, indeed, they would only

consider justifiable, a means to an end. No, Lady L'Estrange; when fame is yours, it will have been toiled for undoubtedly, and won by perseverance. As the inhabitant of Paddyland observes, "Patience and perseverance gets a wife for his rivirence;" you don't want a husband, but your determination will gain you all you need.'

'I like being believed in,' observes Mollie; 'and at least, Lord Mark, you believe in me, don't you?'

Mollie's eyes twinkle wickedly as she asks the question. She is so sure beforehand of the answer.

'Believe in you, Lady L'Estrange,' says Lord Mark, with emotion, 'as I believe in, and hope for, heaven!'

'Thank you,' says Mollie simply.

And this time she looks at Lord Mark again gratefully; and he, foolish fellow! feels his honest heart thumping against his ribs in a way that makes him feel quite

faint, and that nothing but a look from Mollie ever arouses in him.

He would give all he possesses once to hold Mollie in his longing arms; once to press a lover's kiss upon the sweet lips that have never spoken to him except in words of the truest affection and kindness, both for his own sake and for dead Geoffrey's; once to hear Mollie's voice say, 'I love you, Mark!' with the caress which he knows such a voice as Mollie's would lend to those words. A very storm of rebellion sweeps over him for what is, and of regret for what is not, which, as long as the world lasts, will probably never fall to his lot.

For some seconds it is a hard fight. Mollie has risen, and is standing with her hands in his—as she might have laid them in the old days in Geoffrey's. She has placed them in Mark's without a thought, except the simple confiding action of a child who in trouble or sorrow goes to the

one person in all the world whom it can depend upon, and of whose unfailing sympathy it is so sure at all times, in all circumstances. So, without thought of evil or possible temptation to Mark, stood Mollie. Seeing her thus recalls Mark to his senses; and with a smothered groan he drops Mollie's hands as if they burnt him, and turns away.

Mollie is surprised, as well she may be.

'What is the matter, dear Lord Mark?' she asks. 'Can I help you? Are you suffering?'

At her question Mark turns and looks at her.

'I am suffering indeed, Lady L'Estrange,' he answers abruptly; 'and you can help me least of all.'

'What do you mean?' again asks Mollie. 'Do let me help you. You know you are like Geoff to me.'

'Yes, of course I am,' answers Lord Mark, with a smile that is a triumph of

deceit. 'But all the same, I cannot explain. There are some things that Geoff could not have told you, and that I would die rather than say. Good-bye, dear Lady L'Estrange,' Lord Mark says; 'I must go. I am not myself to-day; I feel ill; I cannot stay any longer.'

Much astonished, Mollie gazes at him with questioning eyes.

Lord Mark takes her hand in his, and seems as if he would draw her into his arms; then he suddenly changes his mind, and with a fervent kiss on her hand, and an earnest 'God bless you!' he opens the door quickly, and vanishes from the room.

Mollie remains standing where he had left her, with a puzzled expression upon her usually smiling face, rubbing her hands softly.

'What is the matter with Lord Mark?' says Mollie to herself. 'I do hope he won't often behave like that! Very tiresome! He has gone off without settling one word

about my book, or our day at Earlston. I shall write to him. He is so old-fashioned; he is the only person I know who kisses my hand when he says good-bye. I rather like it.'

CHAPTER III.

EARLSTON AND MARK.

'I cannot divine what it means,
This haunting nameless pain;
A tale of the bygone days
Keeps brooding through my brain.'

'The desire of the moth for the star.'

'FITZROY! Fitzroy!' called Mollie, a few days after the interview between Lord Mark and Mollie recorded in the last chapter. 'Fitzroy!'

Still complete silence. At last Mollie wends her way downstairs to the room that Sir Fitzroy has been graciously pleased to say he would honour by his presence. 'It will do for me to smoke in,' he kindly observed. It was a condescension indeed,

seeing that it was one of the best rooms in the house; and there, in solitary and smoky blessedness, she finds her liege lord.

'I really do think,' says Mollie, roused at last to a conviction of Sir Fitzroy's coolness and indifference, 'that you might give yourself the trouble to answer me by a civil word, instead of letting me scream myself hoarse in my endeavours to find you.'

'You do think so, do you?' answers Sir Fitzroy, puffing, as he speaks, great clouds of smoke, and watching it wreathe itself into rings ere it melts into the air. 'You really think so?'

'Certainly I do,' answers Mollie, with dignity. 'And I must beg, Fitzroy, that once for all you will understand that, when I speak, I expect to be answered and attended to.'

'That entirely depends,' retorts imperturbable Sir Fitzroy, 'upon whether what you favour a doubtfully appreciative world with is worth listening to or not.'

'You find the sound of your own name pleasant enough and easy enough to answer sometimes,' says Mollie sarcastically.

'Perhaps I do,' responds Sir Fitzroy coolly, 'and equally perhaps I don't always choose to answer.'

'That is a fact patent enough to the most limited comprehension,' sarcastically responds Mollie. 'Perhaps, as I have at last unearthed you, it will please you to answer the question I came here to ask.'

'You talk of unearthing me as if I was a fox,' growls Sir Fitzroy; 'you seem to forget that I am your husband.'

'No fear of that,' replies Mollie contemptuously; 'you are not likely to allow such a lapse of memory as that would mean. Sometimes I wish—but never mind!' Mollie breaks off abruptly.

'I will finish your sentence for you,' puts in Sir Fitzroy; 'you cordially wish that I was not your husband, and you wish that some one else was.'

'How dare you!' exclaims Mollie, looking at Sir Fitzroy with eyes that flash angry glances, while her cheeks grow crimson and her mouth quivers at the unkind and unwarranted attack on her conveyed by Sir Fitzroy's speech; 'how dare you!' she repeats. 'You would not venture to say such things to me if Geoff and my father were alive, and you know, moreover, perfectly well, that what you said just now was absolutely untrue. And if I did wish such a thing, it would not be wonderful, considering the way you choose to treat me.

'All I can say is this,' continues Mollie; 'once for all, you must treat me as your wife and the mother of your child (setting apart any other claims I may have to respect and love) has a right to be treated. If you do not do this, I shall leave you. Thank God, I can support myself honestly; and I will do so if you continue in this way any longer—so make your choice!'

And as she speaks Mollie draws herself

up to her full height, and looks with fearless eyes at her husband; excitement has lent a brilliant colour to her cheeks, and has made her eyes sparkle and shine like diamonds. Just indignation is expressed in every line of her expressive face; she looks a woman who has borne silently and in suffering many troubles for a long time, and she equally looks a woman who feels that the moment to act has come, and that she will be no longer a plaything and a slave.

Never has Mollie looked so gloriously handsome, so unconquered. She has spoken, and she means what she says. Sir Fitzroy stares at her, fairly astounded by this impassioned outbreak from the woman to whom he is graciously pleased to mete out a dole of neglect and indifference—Mollie, who usually accepts everything so quietly, to turn and face him like a stag at bay; surely the world is coming to an end for such a thing to happen!

But as he looks Sir Fitzroy's face softens;

Mollie looks so lovely, so winning, he could not do without her; he would have no home, no one to look after him, Robin, and the house; and as he gazes, back to his memory comes Mollie as he had seen her the day of his first visit to Earlston. Visions of the hop-garden; of a man who pleads for a wife, and when the promise of that is accorded to him says, 'You shall never repent marrying me;' of an old church and a sweet young bride; of a May day and a fair young mother—and as these thoughts pass swiftly through his brain, a sort of sorrow and yearning possesses Sir Fitzroy, and he begins to long for the days that his own carelessness and folly have consigned into the story of the past, which might have been the present and the future had he not willed it otherwise.

One moment more, Mollie will have conquered, as by virtue of her goodness and purity she ought to do. There is still a chance of happiness left for her and

Sir Fitzroy—a future for Robin. With all her just wrath, Sir Fitzroy knows that one of the old endearing words and caresses, and the woman who had become his wife so gladly (for Mollie did love him then, how very much only she and God knew) would again only too eagerly nestle into the arms that had once been so ready to embrace her. Again he and Mollie might have made up their differences. 'Dans l'amour il y a toujours un qui embrasse, l'autre qui tend la joue;' he had only to speak to put things once more on their old happy footing. In his heart he recognised his wife's absolute fidelity to him; and equally deep in his heart was the perfect conviction of his real love for her. All might have been well, and this story never written; but suddenly, alas! the vision of Mollie was replaced by one of Circe—tempting lips, enticing arms, maddening eyes, voluptuous charms, once more gained the victory; their weight

would overbalance Mollie's virtues in the scales, that were held by so shaking a hand. It was 'Mollie *versus* Circe;' small chance had the former—her day was over. And even as he thought, Sir Fitzroy's face hardened again. Once again Circe was all in all, Mollie absolutely nothing. With a hateful expression, Sir Fitzroy turned to Mollie, and said:

'Be kind enough to state what it is you do wish—that is, if you know yourself, which I much doubt.'

Mollie has been watching the struggles so plainly depicted upon her husband's face; and, with a sigh, she acknowledges that the day is against her, but outwardly she gives no sign.

'I wish to tell you,' calmly answers Mollie, 'that I am going to Earlston to-morrow, and that Lord Mark is going with me.'

'Oh, indeed!' sneers Sir Fitzroy.

'Have you any objections?' asks Mollie;

'if so, kindly state what they are;' and Mollie looks ready to fight any battle.

'Dear me!' says Sir Fitzroy. 'Of course, not the slightest; he is a perfect chaperon for you.'

Thus would he act. To cover his own iniquities, Sir Fitzroy would put Mollie in the way of every possible temptation; and then, if she had succumbed, would have been the very first to condemn her.

'That is settled, then?' rejoins Mollie. 'We are going early, but return in time for dinner.'

'I dine out,' replies Sir Fitzroy.

'Sans doute, monseigneur!' coolly retorts Mollie. 'Your latest observation was a sheer waste of valuable breath; so take care, Fitzroy. If you are so careless of your power of speech, your lungs will be exhausted—they will refuse to work altogether; and then I shall have the inexpressible misfortune of losing you.'

'Much you'd care!' responds Sir Fitz-

roy, with an ugly sneer that greatly detracts from his undeniable good looks. 'You'd marry again in six months—that is, if there is another man in the world idiot enough to marry you.'

'Much obliged for your flattering opinion,' replies Mollie; and, nothing daunted, she adds with conviction: 'Perhaps if I put an advertisement in *The Matrimonial Gazette*, I might replace you, my beloved; but do, oh do not flatter your sweet self that I should wait six months for your successor—six days would be nearer the mark. After enjoying the sweets of matrimony with you for so long, I shall be unable to support my solitary existence. I shall erect a monument to your sainted memory to this effect—how do you like it?—

'"Here lies what's mortal of Sir Fitzroy L'Estrange:
He left his Mollie—he was fond of change;
His temper it were 'wariable,' his habits very strange:
He's gone to the angels, is Sir Fitzroy L'Estrange."

'Amen!' finishes Mollie piously.

'What trash you do talk, Mollie!' observes Sir Fitzroy. 'Really, your conversation borders on the idiotic.'

He is not to be mollified (excuse the pun) by anything his wife may say.

'If I am idiotic, it is the consequence of seeing no one but "your Highness,"' rejoins Mollie, with a mischievous twinkle in her wicked eyes. 'You don't appear impressed with the magnificent programme of regret—gold letters, on grey, beautifully polished marble—or do you think red would look better? I am rather inclined to red myself; it is more uncommon, and it would be such an original sensation for me to lose you, my adored one, that I should spare no expense on your tomb, even to a figure of myself hanging over it gracefully, with a scroll in my marble hand, on which would be inscribed all your virtues (goodness! what a long scroll it would be!). Thus should I mourn your early demise.'

'No,' growls Sir Fitzroy, 'I am not impressed; for it would all be abominable humbug. You would be nearer the truth and your true feelings if you went to a ball the day after I died, and never came near my grave at all.' And with this amiable expression of his sentiments, Sir Fitzroy hurls himself out of the room and the house, leaving Mollie staring in utter astonishment at his vanishing form.

'Well, I never did!' exclaims Mollie in surprise. 'What is the matter with Fitzroy? Why is he so cross? I was only joking; he might know that. I thought it would amuse him. I couldn't exist or bear my life if it were not for these little flights of fancy. But then,' finishes Mollie, 'Fitzroy, alas! never could see a joke, and never will, to his dying day. It is singularly unfortunate, for I see nothing else. I don't know what is to be done. Now he will probably sulk, and not speak to me for the next week. Oh dear!' sighs poor

Mollie, 'I am always saying the wrong thing.' And with a despairing shrug of her shapely shoulders, and a genuine look of despair on her bonny face, Mollie departs to seek Robin and Clifford, which means consolation.

Mollie dines that night, as usual, in solitary blessedness, as Sir Fitzroy spends the evening with Circe. Sir Fitzroy is silly enough to sulk over Mollie's harmless speech, and to owe her a grudge for it, which he takes his time to forgive. It is, indeed, a matter of doubt whether he will ever either do that or forget it. The French proverb says, '*On a jamais aimé, ce qu'on aime plus.*' And this seems to be Sir Fitzroy's case. It really is doubtful if he ever has loved Mollie by the way he treats her now.

The day of Mollie's proposed expedition to Earlston dawned as fair and lovely as even the most exacting mortal could desire. Regular 'Queen's weather.'

Mollie had settled to meet Lord Mark at the station; accordingly, the appointed hour saw Mollie waiting on the platform. Lord Mark soon joined her, and in a few moments they were flying along in the express to the nearest station to Earlston, where they duly arrived in safety.

Though Mollie knew almost every yard of the scenery and country they passed through, and in this case would never find the journey dull or long, yet it had never seemed so short before as it did on this particular day.

Lord Mark was so bright and pleasant, his conversation so full of anecdote, that the time seemed to fly, and they were at the station almost before Mollie realized that they had started. There they found a roomy fly, a steady driver, and an animal that might and could have run a race with 'Old Time' as to the respectability and steadiness of his general performances, and

beaten the latter out of the field in ignominious fashion.

Mollie and Mark bestowed themselves in the ancient vehicle, which was a happy cross between an open fly, of country fashion and enormous respectability, and a general mourning coach. Nothing so sedate as the progress of this 'tomb upon wheels' could possibly be imagined. An energetic and well-disposed snail would have fairly put it to shame, and caused it to blush for its every-day and extraordinary shortcomings. At the pace of a walking funeral Mollie and her cavalier wend their way, with what patience they may, towards their destination.

'Dear me,' laughs Mollie, when the fourth mile-stone has been passed, and still they seem visibly no nearer to 'the haven where they would be,' 'at this rapid rate of progression, I positively think that, by taking great care of our steed, and giving him several feeds of corn, and our Jehu

sundry draughts of potent ale, we may, if we are very careful, arrive at Earlston just in time to turn round and go home again; that,' she continues, 'will be eminently satisfactory.'

'I agree with you,' replies Lord Mark, laughing also. 'Why—oh! why does a country fly march at this slow rate? I know nothing else that can compare to it except a "square cab" in London.'

'By that I conclude you mean a four-wheeler?' says Mollie.

'You are right,' answers Mark.

'But,' Mollie adds, 'to all things in this world there comes an end; and here,' she exclaims, 'is our longed-for destination!'

While they have been talking they have turned a corner and driven through the lodge gates, and beyond them lies Earlston in all its glory and beauty.

Fair indeed does the old place look, although passing strange, for the hand and presence of dead Sir Villiers and Geoffrey

is felt and missed by Mollie, with a longing for 'men and days gone by' that simply amounts to agony. She felt the change more than words could express; and when they arrived at the house and found many of the old servants who still remained there (Earlston had gone to a distant cousin, who had let it) eager to greet her, Mollie nearly broke down, the contrast between her past happy joyous life, and all she had loved and lost, and her present lonely unloved life was so strange, so awful to bear and endure.

Mollie felt as if her heart must break as she returned the warm greetings of those old friends, who had known and cared for her, in many instances, since her earliest infancy. She had never anywhere else found such loving, true, honest friends as they had ever been to her; she never could again. They were part and parcel of her dear life at beloved Earlston, which had for ever vanished into the past; but the

present and the future were replete with memories of Earlston and them, that time, places, and people alike were powerless to alter, or to make Mollie forget even for the space of sixty short seconds.

Earlston and her friends there were the beloved recollections of Mollie's life. As she moved about among the people, and in company with Lord Mark went over the rooms and garden, all her present sad life was forgotten; Kensington debts and difficulties—even Circe—faded like a dream as one struggles back to wakefulness and consciousness; she seemed to have no place, no memory, but Earlston and the days there.

Once more she was a happy, joyous child, going everywhere hand-in-hand with the Patriarch, that beloved father whom she had cared for so much; once more the voices of René and Margot, of Lettice and Doris, gaily resounded through the air; once more she sees quaint, happy Vivienne, a cigarette in her mouth, B.-and-S. by her side; once

more she is in the hop-garden, listening to the voice which charmed her heart away from her; once more she hears 'Mollie! Mollie!' four times repeated by the one voice that holds for her all the sweetness that music is capable of; once again she sees, as if it were yesterday, the beautiful face of Geoffrey, her darling, her beloved, the brother whose love made up her life.

And as she recalls all the past with a keenness and vividness that is simply acute agony, Mollie falls to weeping in a quiet, deep fashion that speaks more truly of the pain she is suffering than any loud outburst of grief could ever have done.

When this happens they are walking through the Oak-room; through the windows can be plainly seen the fair Kent hills beyond, with the ever-varying light and shade, which is but born to die, over them.

'Don't cry, Lady L'Estrange,' says Lord Mark imploringly; 'you can't think how miserable it makes me to see you.'

They are quite alone, the housekeeper, with a rare discretion, having left Mollie to do the honours of her old home. Still Mollie weeps on unrestrainedly. It seems as if the floodgates were open, and that the storm of her grief would sweep all before it.

Lord Mark feels as if he can stand it no longer. Few men could. He would like to take Mollie in his arms, and for ever shield her from the sorrow which seems in this world to be her lot. It is a terrible temptation, but 'it is one thing to be tempted, another thing to fall;' and Lord Mark, with a mighty effort, conquers his impulse, and is once more the Mark on whom Mollie may safely and surely depend.

At last Lord Mark thinks that Mollie must stop crying, or she will be ill. With an infinite tenderness in his voice, like that of a mother soothing the child in trouble that she loves so much, he touches Mollie's arm gently, and says again:

'Don't cry, Mollie; you will make yourself quite ill.'

For all answer, Mollie, with a sudden movement, put her hands into his, and laying her lovely head upon his shoulder, sobs harder than ever. Pleasant for the man who loves her above everything else in this world! Mollie trembles so that she can hardly stand, and seeing this, Lord Mark releases one hand, and puts his arm about her to keep her from falling. Mollie cannot see his face, for the tears are pouring down her cheeks.

Lord Mark stands there, his head thrown back, his lips white and trembling from the temptation, the mad desire he has to press his lips to Mollie's, in one happy kiss, and so, if but for a brief moment, taste the happiness he craves for. But Lord Mark puts the temptation away from him; he knows that Mollie looks upon him as a brother—the legacy Geoffrey has left her—and by a mighty effort he conquers the

temptation. So he lets her weep still a little, and then he says:

'Now, Lady L'Estrange, I am going to exercise my authority; you must not cry even one tear more—I positively forbid it. If you go home with red eyes and nose, Fitzroy will think that we have been quarrelling; then I shall never be allowed to take you for an outing again, which I, for one, should regret—how much I can't tell you. Dry your eyes, that's a dear Mollie!'

Slowly Mollie obeys. Mark always gives her a feeling that she must obey him, which is specially pleasant and charming to her. Like all women, she glories in a sense of dependence when the man she depends upon meets with her cordial approval. And this Lord Mark certainly does.

'That is right!' says Lord Mark, smiling; 'now you look a little more like yourself. I really thought it would have

should be so good to her, so constant in his attentions and friendship for her; but she puts it all down to his devotion to Geoffrey's memory, and she seeks no further; she does not bother about the cause if the effect is so good.

'Thank you, Lord Mark!' gaily answers Mollie; 'it is no use being cross with you —at least, trying to be, for all you do is to answer one compliment by another. Let us go over the rest of the house,' says Mollie.

So together they wander all over the dear old place. Mollie shows Lord Mark all the rooms; she points out to him the dining-room and drawing-room, and the room which was the scene of her never-to-be-forgotten first meeting with Sir Fitzroy.

Mollie relates to Lord Mark all about that famous evening, at which he laughs most heartily, and then she shows him the pictures of her mother and sisters, of Sir Villiers and Geoffrey—two of the latter, one

a bonny boy of six years old, the other a life-sized portrait in full uniform.

Mollie breaks down utterly as she gazes upon the picture, which is a marvellous likeness, and it is some time before Lord Mark can restore her to any degree of composure again.

Then they go and lunch in the dining-room. Mollie does the honours, and tells Lord Mark of Granite's famous performances with the three dishes of bacon, at which he laughs, and so does Mollie, until a fit apiece seems imminent.

Mollie has an extraordinary power of description, and to hear her tell a story is so like life, that it is like hearing and seeing the people she describes—real word-painting.

Luncheon over, they went all through the lovely gardens, and then slowly proceeded to the churchyard. There, in the quaint, peaceful old churchyard, full of graves that had been there for many a long year, sleep-

ing their last long sleep, lay all that was mortal of the two human beings that Mollie had loved with a love that made her entire existence.

How lovely the old place looked. To the right lay the home-farm, clothed in a mantle of ivy, while sheep, cattle, and deer fed on the short sweet grass. Overhead the sky was a deep turquoise blue, with hardly a cloud upon it; the air was soft and balmy. To the left of the church lay the still, calm lake; so clear was the water, that the reflection of the clouds, and even of a swift-winged bird flying home to its little ones, could be plainly seen in it. Across the lake stretched at one end a quaint rustic bridge, and at the other, by the church, a bridge of grey stone, with tufts of red and brown moss and lichen growing in every hole and between the stones; and behind the church was the head-keeper's cottage, the blue smoke of the kitchen fire coming through the chimney and melting into space, leaving

behind it a delicious smell of wood and peat smoke.

It was a scene never really to be forgotten by either Mollie or Lord Mark. They went over the old church, which was beautiful both inside and out. Mark seemed to see a vision of Mollie as a bride. As he looked at the altar he could see her quite well, as he imagined she must have looked that day, full of love and hope, her lovely face beaming with happiness as she gazed at Sir Fitzroy's devoted face.

And then Lord Mark remembered the reverse side of the picture, and as he thought of what Mollie's life must have been in this fair place, surrounded with all that love and money could give her, and as he thought of her now, without either (except the love he had for her, which he could not show), Lord Mark could have found it in his heart to kill the man who had culled this fair blossom only to throw it aside as unworthy of a thought, once its sweetness and

freshness had been bestowed upon him, had undeniably become his. But such thoughts would not do. Once again Lord Mark checks himself.

Having seen the church, Mollie leads the way silently to where are the graves of Sir Villiers and Geoffrey. As they had been together in life, so together, but side by side, they sleep quietly. No dreadful stones here: only a lovely mound of flowers, tended by loving hands, and kept newly planted according to the different seasons of the year. Two marble crosses bear the dates and inscriptions that are necessary. Nothing here is gloomy; all speaks of rest and peace, and of the resurrection which shall, equally with them, be ours eventually.

'"Not lost, but gone before,"' reads Lord Mark from the inscription on Geoffrey's grave. 'Dear old Geoff,' he continues, 'no one can ever replace you to me!'

'You are right,' replies Mollie gratefully; 'there never can be a second Geoff to either of us in this world.'

Mollie puts on some lovely flowers and wreaths that she has brought with her.

For a long time they stand there in silence. Their hearts are too full of the past and the present for speech to be easy. Over and over again they recall to themselves every look and word of the dear ones who repose there so quietly. Alive, people may not inspire respect; but dead, they are robed with a majesty, a solemnity that compels awe and reverence from even the most heedless, careless person. There is a grandeur in death that life often lacks, but which makes itself felt and heeded when all that is mortal has found immortality.

'What a contrast your present life is, Lady L'Estrange, to your old life here!' says Lord Mark suddenly.

It seems as if the words were forced from him, the difference is so strong.

'It is indeed!' answers Mollie, with a deep sigh; 'but these,' pointing, as she speaks, to the two graves, 'have often kept

me from taking steps to alter what would otherwise have been quite unendurable. I have often wondered I have not taken the so-called "good things" of this world, that might have been mine every day and hour of my life, for the simple trouble of accepting them; but no! I could not look on these graves, as I do now, with a firm faith in our future reunion if such had been the case. I must keep to what is pure and right; I could not forfeit my right to meet my beloved ones again.'

'I quite understand your feeling,' answers Lord Mark softly; 'you will weather the storm of your troubles, I feel sure, and some day will look back upon all you have now suffered for so long as the school of trial—which indeed it is—that is needed to fit each one of us for eternity.'

'You always put things comfortably,' says Mollie, smiling, 'and you always help me, Lord Mark; once more I thank you for your goodness to me.'

'I want no thanks, Lady L'Estrange,' Lord Mark replies, 'only your friendship.'

'And that is and always has been yours,' says Mollie. 'We must go,' she continues, 'or we shall lose the train; we have still to pay a visit to Mrs. Acres and Mrs. Wilmington before we return to the station.'

With one long last lingering look Mollie and Lord Mark turn away, leave the churchyard, and return to the house. They go on to Primrose Farm, and Mollie shows Lord Mark the famous hop-garden.

Mrs. Acres greets Mollie with the greatest delight, and sets before her two hungry visitors a tea that would have made the most jaded appetite keen again; and then, laden with a basket of good things, they wend their way to Mrs. Wilmington, at Springfield, where the greeting is as cordial as at Primrose Farm.

Finally, in possession of a second basket of butter, eggs, etc., which Mrs. Wilmington insists upon Mollie's accepting, they arrive

safely at the station, and are soon seated in a first-class carriage, reserved for them by Cole, the attentive porter who has known Mollie all her life, and they are once more speeding along in the express back to London.

Mollie is very tired. The emotions she has experienced during the day have necessarily been varied; and she never goes to Earlston without feeling depressed by the contrast of her present life to the 'days of yore,' which were so full to her of all that could make life pleasant, a thing much to be desired. Therefore she lies back with her head against the cushions, and her eyes closed. Very fair and winning does she look; above all, so pure and good. And Lord Mark, who is sitting opposite to her, registers a new vow as he gazes on the fair picture she presents, that more than ever must he, as far as possible, shield her from all harm—save her, as much as may be, from all real trouble.

Lord Mark has consecrated his life to her, though Mollie does not know it. A solitary life, and his time to bestow upon Mollie, is more happiness to Lord Mark than any other life could be; and as long as Mollie lives—indeed, as long as he lives—he will care for her. No child will ever call him father; no woman will ever be his wife. As he thinks thus, Lord Mark gets up and moves the cushions so that Mollie sleeps more comfortably (for our Mollie is safe in the arms of Morpheus); and as his hand touches her soft cheek, as he adjusts the cushions, Mark feels that if he were Sir Fitzroy instead of himself, he should be the happiest man in the world.

Just then Mollie wakes, and, sitting up, rubs her eyes vigorously to sweep the sleep out of them.

'I verily believe I have been indulging in "forty winks"!' exclaims she. 'How could you let me be so rude, Lord

Mark! Indeed, I feel quite ashamed of myself!'

'Pray do not apologize for temporarily depriving me of the agreeable sound of your voice,' replies Lord Mark; 'you looked so happy. I had not the heart to disturb your slumbers.'

Mollie sits blinking her eyes, in which divine sleep has still left traces; she looks as solemn and as bewildered as an owl suddenly brought into the light.

'I had a delicious sleep!' she says. 'The worst of it is, that happiness only seems to come to one in dreams. However, one must be thankful even for small mercies; and dreams are like bygone days, they cannot be taken away from us—their memory is ours.'

By this time the lights of the station are visible; a few minutes more, and they are safe in a cab.

'I have enjoyed my day so much,' says Mollie, 'thanks to you, Lord Mark.'

'I also have been perfectly happy,'

whispers Lord Mark, possessing himself of a hand that is very near his own.

Mollie lets her hand lie quietly in his strong clasp; she feels so safe with Lord Mark, so sure that in him she has found the friend, companion, and protector she so much needs. It is pleasant to her to sit thus with her hand in Lord Mark's; and she grudges the moments, that seem to fly, which bring Kensington nearer and nearer to them.

Lord Mark sits 'entranced in a dream' of perfect happiness; and sorely grudges the fact that, like a dream, his happiness must soon have an ending. Even as he thinks, the cab, with an astonishing rattle, draws up at the door. Once again the delights of Kensington are Mollie's; she sighs heavily as she realizes the fact. Mark helps her out.

'Won't you come in?' says Mollie, as Lord Mark seems as if about to say 'Good-night.'

'I should like to, very much indeed,' answers Lord Mark.

So together they go in. A nice little supper has been prepared for them by Clifford, including 'egg sandwiches,' which she is especially famous for making. Mollie quickly changes her dress for a comfortable dressing-gown, and reappears, looking prettier than ever, and joins Lord Mark; and they sit down to supper, prepared to enjoy the feast spread before them.

'Where is Sir Fitzroy?' asks Mollie suddenly, turning to Clifford.

'Out, my lady,' answers Clifford briefly.

Mollie swallows a sandwich so hurriedly that she nearly chokes, and something like a lump seems to form in her throat. Lord Mark, who is looking at her, sees her expression, and hastens to the rescue.

'How greedy!' he laughs; 'why, Lady L'Estrange, you nearly choked in your hurry. One would think that I had starved you all day.'

'I didn't mean to eat so fast,' replies Mollie. 'I don't want any more,' and she pushes away her plate, and leaves the table.

'Never mind, Mollie,' says Lord Mark (he is unconscious that he has used her Christian name; not so Mollie—it sounds pleasant to her); 'don't let anyone or anything spoil our perfect day. Have you seen Robin?'

'Yes,' replies Mollie, trying to smile; it is a queer little smile, more pitiful than tears; 'he looks so happy.'

'God bless him!' says Lord Mark; 'he is a king among boys. But it is time for all good folks to go to sleep,' he continues, 'so I will depart.' Clifford has disappeared, and they are quite alone. 'Good-night, Mollie,' whispers Lord Mark; 'take care of yourself.'

'Good-night, Mark,' replies Mollie, with her lovely eyes raised to his.

Lord Mark seems as if fighting against

some strong feeling, but he fights successfully; and raising Mollie's soft fingers to his lips, he kisses them passionately, and hurries away out of the house.

So ends Mollie's day at Earlston, but the memory abides with them both.

CHAPTER IV.

KING PET.

'Depend upon it, my friend, if children are fond of you, there's something of the true metal in your system.'

OWEN: *A Waif.*

THAT the opinion of the writer of 'Owen' is a correct one was fully confirmed a few days after the expedition Mollie and Lord Mark had made to Earlston. Robin had grown into a most winning and lovely little fellow. Not only was he beautiful in features, but especially lovely in beauty of character and disposition, young as he was, which seems, as we view it, as if God spoke to us direct from heaven, in the

persons of the little children He loves so much, always. Robin is now a little duck of a child of three years old. His cheeks are like peaches that have been kissed into warmth, life, and colour by an October sun on a south wall. His great eyes often wear an expression of inquiry and solemnity, and have a far-away look in their clear depths that is infinitely touching. His bright curls are rumpled all over his head, and in his small 'sailor's garb' he looks the sweetest little 'Jack Tar' that ever was on land or afloat.

There is a look in Robin's eyes very often which seems to say that he sees what mortal eyes wot not of; there is a far-away expression that seems to say that this world will not keep him long. Yet he is perfectly well and strong, and as full of pranks and mischief as anyone can wish. He leads Clifford, whose special care and pet he is, a nice life of it. His

tricks are only to be equalled by the immortal magpie in the 'Gazza Ladra,' for he has a perfect talent for hiding away things in the most wonderful places, where no human being would ever think of looking for them; and when he sees Clifford or his mother fairly started upon a wild-goose chase, he claps his small chubby hands, and shrieks aloud with laughter and delight at their futile efforts to discover their lost property.

It would take a large volume to enter the addresses of all the hiding-places in which Robin confiscates the general property of the house. The only person whose goods are safe from his mischievous fingers is his father. Sir Fitzroy is really very fond of Robin, but that young gentleman stands in wholesome awe of him as far as his things are concerned, though, on the other hand, he will take all sorts of liberties with his father. But this little monkey is wise, and knows what he may

venture upon, and equally where 'prudence is the better part of valour.' Mollie and Clifford had a way with him best described as Mrs. Browning puts it:

> 'Women know
> The way to rear up children (to be just);
> They know a simple, merry, tender knack
> Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes,
> And stringing pretty words that make no sense,
> And kissing full sense into empty words,
> Which things are corals to cut life upon.
> Although such trifles, children learn by such
> Love's holy earnest in a pretty play.'

Robin was devoted to them both, but his special favourite was Lord Mark.

A few days after the visit to Earlston, Mollie was sitting in the drawing-room trying to write. This was a useless endeavour, for Master Robin had elected to bear her company, and utterly declined that Mollie should occupy herself with anything but what concerned his amusement.

Therefore each time Mollie thought that she had settled him comfortably for at any

rate a few minutes, a little figure would creep up close to her, a sweet mouth would be pressed to her ear, and 'Cuckoo! cuckoo!' would resound through the stillness.

'You bad child!' whispered Mollie; 'won't you let poor mother write? Robin won't have any nice bread and jam, or sweets, or clothes to wear, if mother don't work.'

'Robin wants to play,' was the only observation of this autocrat of the nursery, in response to Mollie's appeal. 'Be Robin's gee-gee.'

Seeing that there is nothing for it but obedience, Mollie catches Robin up in her arms, and gives him a loving kiss, which the little fellow returns with compound interest, until Mollie is half smothered and wholly breathless.

'Robin! Robin!' gasps Mollie at last; 'leave off, my king, or mother will be so tired she won't be able to do gee-gee at all.'

Acknowledging the truth of this statement, which even he can understand, Robin graciously consents to leave off smothering his mother.

'Quick!' is all he replies.

Mollie puts him upon the sofa, and stooping down, he clasps his arms round his mother's neck, and brandishing a whip aloft, to the imminent danger of Mollie's eyes and ears, he urges his steed to begin the trot in which he especially delights.

Up and down the room runs Mollie obediently, until she is quite exhausted; her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes shine so brightly from the exertion. Her small tyrant urges her to renewed exertions; he screams, and laughs, and chuckles with delight.

'More! more!' he shouts; 'Robin likes it.'

All unheeded, the door has opened, and Lord Mark has appeared, his entrance being unheard in the noise and din. He

stands spell-bound, looking at the fairest picture of a mother and child it has ever been his lot to witness.

Robin's arms are clasped tight round his mother's neck; her face is half turned to his; his dimpled cheek rests against hers. Both faces, which bear such a strong resemblance to each other, are flushed and lovely with the exertion of their romp. Mollie's eyes sparkle; so do Robin's.

Just as Mark appears, Robin raises one hand with his whip high in the air, and one shoe falls off, leaving a little foot cased in a white silk sock distinctly visible.

'Gee up, pony!' shouts Robin.

'Pony is so tired,' answers Mollie, gasping.

Just then she sees Lord Mark; so does Robin; and before you can count ten, Robin has, with the usual gratitude of his charming sex for those who have slaved for them, flown away from his mother, and is nestling in Lord Mark's arms, with his pretty head resting upon his shoulder, and

an expression of perfect content upon his sweet face.

'I'm more than usually glad to see you, Lord Mark,' says Mollie, when she can speak. 'That child will be the death of me; I have been enacting the doubtfully pleasant part of his steed for the last three-quarters of an hour. You have arrived just at the right moment; now,' she adds laughingly, 'you shall take your share of the entertainment.'

'Gladly,' replies Lord Mark. 'And how is "King Pet" to-day?' he asks.

'Robin wants chocolate,' was the irrelevant reply of this specimen of the rising generation.

'You bad boy!' laughs Mollie; 'who spoils you?'

'Gentleman,' replies Robin, gravely but promptly.

'There's gratitude for you!' says Mollie. 'Now, Lord Mark, what do you think of your favourite child?'

'What I have always thought, Lady L'Estrange,' answers Lord Mark; 'that he is, and always will be, a darling—the one child in the world that I thoroughly care for.'

'Robin knows it,' answers Mollie, 'and trades upon it, little monkey!' looking lovingly at her son as she speaks.

'Robin wants a game,' condescendingly observes this young person, who is beginning to feel himself injured, because for the space of about sixty seconds his mother has addressed her observations to Lord Mark instead of him.

'All right; you shall have as many games as you like,' answers Lord Mark, throwing Robin high into the air, and catching him again skilfully, while Robin yells with delight in appreciation of his performance.

This amusement exhausted, Lord Mark pretends to be a lion; then they have hide-and-seek, then blind-man's-buff; then

they play at soldiers; and as a finish they run a race to catch Mollie, which she allows Robin to do, to his intense delight. But the lovely eyes are beginning to show signs of unmistakable sleep; the little limbs are quite tired.

'Dustman's coming!' whispers Mollie to Robin. 'Come along, my king, to Bedfordshire.'

'Gentleman carry Robin; mother come too,' answers the young sovereign.

Laughingly Mollie and Mark comply. Lord Mark carries him to the nursery, where Clifford receives him with open arms, and half smothers him with kisses. Then Mollie and Lord Mark go and chat in the day-nursery, while Robin goes through his toilette for the night; but when he is safe in his nest, they go in again and say good-night to him.

A little angel does he look; and so thinks Lord Mark, as he waves a last kiss

to Robin, and follows Mollie downstairs again. The child is Mollie's safeguard and greatest treasure. What would she do if God called the pure child-life to Heaven?

CHAPTER V.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

'Domum mansit Circe.'

R. Greene.

'A twist of gold was round her hair; a robe
Of samite without price, that more expressed
Than hid her, clung about her lissome limbs.'

Tennyson: *Vivien.*

'"Come into my parlour," said the Spider to the Fly;
"It's the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy."'

This old saying Circe Dysart murmurs gently to herself one evening about a fortnight after Robin's romp with Lord Mark.

It is quite the end of May. Circe is putting the last touches to her toilet preparatory to receiving Sir Fitzroy at dinner. This dining there is no rare event; indeed,

it is the exception when her festive board is not honoured by his presence.

Of late he has been there more than ever. The toils of the enchantress hold him faster than they did even a year ago. Constant companionship with a woman of the calibre of Circe can only have one effect, and that effect has been produced to the full in Sir Fitzroy's case; namely, a complete and lamentable deterioration of moral character. It was a case of the most mad infatuation on Sir Fitzroy's side, and of the glamour on the other which passion can lend to such an uncontrolled nature as Circe's.

Sir Fitzroy found no happiness except with her, and she had so far forgotten everything that she made no secret of her preference for him. Mollie was completely and openly neglected. If something did not happen to curb Sir Fitzroy's insanity, the world would soon listen to the details of one scandal more; and it seemed as if

that necessary something would never occur—that Mollie would be more wretched than ever, Circe and Sir Fitzroy more demented.

On this particular evening Circe has made up her mind to entrap Sir Fitzroy more completely into her net. They are to dine together and go to the theatre, for Sir Fitzroy openly accompanies her about wherever she chooses to lead him.

Circe has formed a resolution; time will reveal it. Meantime she makes herself as fair as possible, so that Sir Fitzroy may gaze upon her with even more than his usual amount of satisfaction.

Circe, after her fashion, is in love with Sir Fitzroy. He has been reigning-favourite in her most capricious heart ever since his visit at Stepmead Abbey, a length of service that no one else has ever been allowed to fulfil. He is very proud of his appointment, for, as a 'Professional Beauty,' Mrs. Dysart could not be suffered to remain in

the world of Vanity Fair without a constant string of fresh admirers; and that he should have held his own under the advance of a regiment of lovers, and put them all to flight, is, he considers, a matter to be proud of, a cause for undoubted rejoicing.

Her toilet completed, Circe proceeds leisurely downstairs, and turning the handle of the drawing-room door, enters quietly.

'There is my fly, ready established in my parlour,' she murmurs with evident satisfaction, in so low a tone that Sir Fitzroy does not hear her. He is so absorbed in thought that he does not hear her coming, and therefore is not aware of her presence until she lays her hand upon his arm.

Sir Fitzroy starts and turns round, to see Circe standing close by him. She certainly looks lovely enough to satisfy the most *blasé* taste.

In the thick masses of her blue-black

hair, twists of gold cord are cunningly entwined; her dress is

> 'In colour like the satin-shining palm
> On sallows in the windy gleams of March.'

It describes more than veils the rare perfections of her lovely figure; the graceful folds and soft drapery show each line and curve of the beautiful form; they cover, but still make visible, the beauties of this woman, who is as fair a specimen of womanhood and embodied evil as ever dawned upon an appreciative world.

Her great black eyes glow like fire in her head; her perfectly curved lips are parted in a triumphant smile as she sees the effect of her rare beauty expressed plainly by Sir Fitzroy's admiring gaze; her soft cheeks bear the tint of a fresh-gathered rose; the lace which half covers her bosom rises and falls quickly with the promptings of the resolution she has come to.

Small wonder that Sir Fitzroy forgets Mollie when in the presence of, and submissive to, the wiles of material beauty such as this. Sir Fitzroy is a man of little principle; his own wishes and the best way of satisfying them have ever been his sole guide through life. The good that really is in him he will not listen to; the way of evil-doers is much easier to walk in, and the road far smoother.

What a sad, terrible failure can be made of the fair gift, 'Life,' which God has given us to use for His glory and our good, if passions are yielded to, if wrong triumphs over right, if evil desires are unchecked and are victorious over all!

Such a fate seemed imminent for Sir Fitzroy, for Circe wished to lead his willing steps over a precipice that they could never climb up again.

'At last,' says Sir Fitzroy gladly. 'I began to think you had altered your mind, and did not mean to appear at all. It

seems ages since I arrived.' And he looks fondly at the lovely woman by his side.

'Very good for you to wait, sir,' rejoins Circe, smiling provokingly. 'Do you admire me, now I have appeared?'

'Admire you!' replies Sir Fitzroy madly; 'I should think I do. Have I ever done anything else since that day at Stepmead, when you first drove me distracted with your fatal beauty and charm?'

'That's right,' answers Circe; 'I never allow anyone who has once cared for me to forget me again—you, least of all,' glancing archly at Sir Fitzroy as she speaks.

'You do care for me, then, a little?' whispers Sir Fitzroy hoarsely, touching the perfumed tresses that are so near his lips with a tender touch.

'Better than anyone in the world; better than name or life!' replies Circe.

'My darling!' answers Sir Fitzroy, taking

Circe in his arms and kissing her fervently, 'I adore you, and you only!'

'Will you grant a request I have to make?' asks Circe, after a few moments have elapsed.

'What you will, sweetheart,' replies the infatuated worshipper; 'say, what is it?'

'No, no,' laughs Circe; 'I shall not satisfy your curiosity until it pleases me to do so, and the right moment has not arrived yet; suffice it to say that when it does arrive I shall expect you to fulfil your promise.'

'When did I ever break one made to you?' asks Sir Fitzroy.

'Well,' responds the Siren, 'I believe you have been true to me; be satisfied with my good opinion of you, and let us go down to dinner, or the carriage will be here before we are ready.'

So they adjourn to the dining-room, and, sustained by a first-rate dinner and excellent champagne, Sir Fitzroy feels at

peace with all the world; the qualms of his elastic conscience are completely drowned, and he is more madly in love with Circe than ever. They dine, as usual, *tête-à-tête;* the dinner is small, but perfectly chosen and cooked, and the servants are, as they need to be in such a home, models of quietness, blindness, deafness, and discretion.

Dinner over, Sir Fitzroy betakes himself to the delights of the smoking-room and a cigarette which Circe's fair fingers have chosen for him; and, if the truth must be told, she has lit it for him besides; to the comfort of a cup of black coffee which could not be beaten, hardly equalled, in Constantinople; and to the charm of a 'petit verre de fine Champagne,' of an age and quality above suspicion, and awaits with patience and fortitude the moment of his departure with Circe for the theatre.

Soon that instant arrives, and Circe's high-steppers speedily land them at the

Gaiety. This queen among theatres is, as usual, crowded; one of the most popular burlesques of their charming *répertoire* is in the height of its glory; the stars, both ladies and gentlemen, who have so long contributed to its undoubted success, are singing and dancing and looking their best; the Crutch and Toothpick Brigade are assembled in irresistible force; at least, they have only one opinion, as they have only one idea, and that is, that they are unquestionably irresistible at all times and in all circumstances; their motto is, 'Veni, vidi, vici;' pretty women and gallant sons of Mars, etc., fill the stalls and boxes; the 'gods' are in excellent humour; everything is going on satisfactorily; everyone seems pleased with his or her appearance.

Circe sweeps into the box that she always has whenever she goes to the Gaiety. It is a pit box, and in a capital place for seeing. She seats herself in the

full blaze of her undoubted beauty, and calmly surveys the audience through her opera-glasses, talking to Sir Fitzroy as she does so, and pointing out different people to him.

Sir Fitzroy leans over her, and answers her questions. Then he takes up her bouquet of roses and lilies, and begins mechanically to pick some of the sweet blossoms to pieces.

'What are you doing?' exclaims Circe, for the first time noticing this wholesale destruction of her property.

'A thousand pardons,' answers Sir Fitzroy; 'it is a bad habit I have of pulling things to bits like that. Never mind, Circe, I will get you a better one to-morrow.'

The truth is, that Sir Fitzroy is feeling rather nervous. Though he goes about openly with Circe, he does not often go to the theatre with her; and being aware of her beauty, and that she is a woman no

one could overlook, he rather wishes she would shade herself behind the curtain instead of exhibiting herself to the eyes of an admiring public, who know quite well who she is and all about her.

In the few theatre expeditions they have indulged in up to now they have been fortunate, and have not met anyone they knew; but then they have chosen quieter scenes for their amusement.

Sir Fitzroy, infatuated as he is, has still some sense left of the fitness of things, of what is due to society and the world generally, of what 'Mrs. Grundy' will say, and of the position he will be in if his acquaintance with Circe is much more discussed; therefore he has been much against the Gaiety being chosen as the scene of their evening's entertainment. But equally in this, as in all else, he has been at once overruled by her. She pouted and pleaded and insisted, told him he did not care for her, that she would

never see him again; in short, teased him in the way that only such women can, and therefore, as she intended, she gained the day.

Circe had no intention of allowing her beauty to blush unseen, so she sat in the full glare of the lights, and revelled in Sir Fitzroy's very evident uneasiness, the cause of which she very quickly surmised.

Sir Fitzroy had a very uncomfortable feeling that something disagreeable was about to happen; and that madly in love, as he undoubtedly was, with Circe, he would have given a great deal had she elected to choose any other field than this theatre for the arena of her follies and triumphs on this particular night. However, here they are, and here undoubtedly Circe intends them to remain for the evening.

Sir Fitzroy feels like a man who, in a smart party, where genuineness and true feeling are at a very decided discount, con-

sequently, 'we must dissemble,' sits down in fancied security, and inadvertently, alas! finds that ill-luck has placed in his way 'a pin,' whose powers of pricking, if of nothing else, are fully developed, and like as his quivering flesh would writhe in agony on the point of that fatal weapon, so his shrinking heart fails before the ordeal that he instinctively feels is before him, that he must pass through and suffer.

Just after the first act begins Sir Fitzroy is leaning over Circe, talking so earnestly to her, that in his position and manner is an implied caress, a distinct acknowledgment of affection so patent that the least observing and most thoroughly stupid person could not possibly fail to see and understand it in this light.

One of Sir Fitzroy's hands holds her bouquet again; the other is round the back of the chair, against which Circe reclines with a grace that no one can fail to remark. Nine people out of ten would think that

Fitzroy's arm was round her waist, though such is really not the case. At this very moment some new arrivals walk into the stalls. They are two distant relations of his wife's; and with them, all unwitting that her husband is so near her, are Mollie and Lord Mark.

Instinctively Sir Fitzroy draws back. It is one thing to go where he likes with Circe, to the utter oblivion of his wife; it is quite another thing to be openly seen by Mollie in the company of the woman whom she must know has most effectually supplanted her in all and every sense of the word.

More than ever does Sir Fitzroy wish himself miles away. But it is too late. Lord Mark at any rate has seen Fitzroy and his companions; he passes to his seat with a contempt on his face that he is at no pains to hide. Another moment, and Mollie will see also.

Lord Mark begins to talk wildly on all

sorts of subjects; so energetic is his conversation, that he is very nearly politely requested to leave the theatre; it is almost hinted to him that his room is better than his company. He hopes by this that Mollie's attention may be diverted, and that she may not be insulted by the sight of her husband's open infidelity.

Mollie goes to the theatre very seldom; consequently when such a treat falls to her lot, she enjoys it most keenly, and appreciates it as a child at its first pantomime might do; therefore she now sits absorbed by the actors and the music, so well played by Lutz and his accomplished orchestra. She is sitting between Lord Mark and her cousin.

For some time all goes on well. Sir Fitzroy has withdrawn behind the shadow of the friendly curtains. It is just possible that the evening may end without Mollie being aware of his presence.

The second act is over; all may yet be

well. Unluckily, just at this moment, Sir Fitzroy gets up to open the door of the box, and let a little air in. Two of the rising generation are seated in front of Mollie. The noise made by the opening of the box-door attracts their attention, and they begin to discuss the occupants of the box.

The orchestra have not yet resumed their playing; and the hum of voices is not sufficiently loud to preclude people in the stalls from holding a sustained conversation comfortably, and from plainly hearing all that their neighbours may be talking about.

'By Jove!' says Crutch and Toothpick, senior. He is senior to his companion by the difference of twenty-three against twenty; and therefore, by virtue of his matured judgment, considers himself quite qualified to give an opinion, from which there shall be, like the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not, no ap-

peal. 'By Jove!' he repeats; 'there's Circe Dysart; and, needless to add, Fitzroy L'Estrange is in attendance!'

'Where?' asks Crutch and Toothpick, junior.

There is a scent of something that verges on the borders of a scandal in his —senior's—remark that sounds gratefully in the ears of the junior; therefore he is all alert, roused out of his usual magnificent indifference to everything, except his own concerns.

'There!' responds Crutch, senior, pointing rudely at Circe and Sir Fitzroy; 'can't you see? or don't you know who I mean?' he continues, impatiently.

'I can see as well as you can,' retorts Crutch, junior; 'but I never heard of the people you refer to before.'

'Where have you lived all your life?' rejoins the other, contemptuously. 'Not know Circe Dysart—the Siren, as she is called? Then I will tell you all about

her, and also enlighten your weak mind on the subject of her cavalier;' and Crutch, senior, details for the benefit of his companion all about Circe and Fitzroy, to which Crutch, junior, listens with open mouth and staring eyes of appreciation and amazement, and registers a mental vow that he will do his best in the future to imitate Sir Fitzroy's noble example.

Happily his conduct will not be so iniquitous as that of the man he is now envying with all that organ called his heart, as being only a few years removed from a babe in the nursery, and under age, he has not yet caused one more unhappy woman to wish it had pleased Providence not to create her by the misery of becoming his neglected wife.

When Crutch, senior's apt description has come to an end, Crutch, junior, is in a state bordering upon absolute liveliness; at least, as near anything that is not apathy as he will ever get in his life.

'She's a splendid woman!' he exclaims at last, his insignificant eyes literally blinking with appreciation. 'Fitzroy L'Estrange is a lucky fellow; I wish I was as lucky myself!'

'You do—really?' laughs Crutch, senior. 'That is a good joke. No lady would ever look at a specimen of humanity like you; besides,' he adds grandly, 'I consider such things bad form. Sir Fitzroy has a lovely wife: I much prefer her appearance to that of Mrs. Dysart.'

With this parting word of wisdom, Crutch, senior, settles himself into his stall again, and yawns, until all who behold him feel that the nearest M.D. will have to be hastily summoned, as nothing less than a dislocated jaw can be the result of such gigantic efforts.

When the two boys began their edifying conversation Mollie had been quietly listening to the music which was always pleasant to her—that of Lord Mark's kind

voice. She was not, for a wonder, thinking of her husband and of Circe; and had it not been for that most fatal and reprehensible habit indulged in by nearly everyone—that of talking in public places all kinds of scandal—she might have gone home in blissful ignorance — 'where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise.' Decidedly Mollie had no desire for wisdom in this matter; but fate and the two Crutches ordained it otherwise.

Lord Mark had been an agonized listener to the opening of their conversation; and though he talked his loudest, and did his very best to prevent Mollie's attention straying in their direction, yet it was useless.

Suddenly Mollie turned to him, and laying her hand on his arm, said breathlessly:

'Do you hear what those gentlemen are saying? It is not true, is it? Tell me it is not true!' she implores.

Lord Mark is distressed beyond measure.

He does not know what to answer; but he is spared all trouble of replying, for at that moment something makes Circe laugh, which she does so loudly that all eyes are immediately riveted upon her and Sir Fitzroy.

Mollie looks also, and sees that which Lord Mark would have given ten years of his life to have kept from her, to have spared her—she sees, beyond all possibility of doubt, her own defeat, her rival's victory. Mollie gives a sort of gasp; her eyes are fixed upon her husband, and he gazes at her as if spell-bound.

'Here indeed,' thinks Sir Fitzroy, 'is with a vengeance the misfortune I knew was impending!' and bitterly he regrets his own folly in not making a firm stand against Circe's wish to honour that especial theatre with her presence. But it is too late for regrets; the deed is done; and seeing the disgust so plainly expressed upon

his wife's face, Fitzroy becomes reckless, and redoubles his attentions to Circe.

Mollie can stand it no longer.

'Take me away, Lord Mark!' she whispers: 'I cannot stay here! I am ill; let me go home!'

She rises hurriedly, and makes some hasty excuses to her cousins, and then moves out of the stalls. As she gets up the two Crutches turn round to see what is occurring.

Crutch, senior, fixes his eye-glass in his orb with a vacant expression, but drops the glass again with a horrified look, while he exclaims in an agitated voice to Crutch, junior:

'Done it this time, by all that's unlucky: she must have heard every word of what I said!'

'Heard what? Who do you mean?' inquires Crutch, junior.

'Why,' answers Crutch, senior, pointing to Mollie's retreating form, 'there goes

Lady L'Estrange! She was sitting exactly behind us, and must therefore have been extremely gratified by my account of her husband's proceedings.'

And for once in their useless lives the two Crutches feel genuinely ashamed of themselves, and make a vow, which they keep for the extraordinary space of five minutes and three quarters—that this shall be a warning to them, and that before they again give vent to their opinion about their neighbours' affairs they will ascertain beyond a doubt who their neighbours are.

Thus, disquieted and crestfallen, they resume their study of the stage and the want of decent attire exhibited by the ladies of the corps de ballet, in which edifying study such minds as theirs find the food best suited to them.

Circe also has seen Mollie and Lord Mark as they are leaving the theatre.

'Dear me,' she observes, 'there is your

mad conduct he has caused a change in its character and intensity.

Up to this evening he has still had a chance of better things, of once more putting his life and Mollie's on a better footing, even if it were only the ghost of the old days of their courtship and early married life; but now! how is it possible that they can ever be on any better terms? No; the deed is done, the dice are thrown, and the numbers have turned up against him, and for Circe.

As he meditates his mood changes; at first he had yearning thoughts after bygone days; now all he makes up his mind to is that Mollie is lost to him for ever, but that Circe still remains to fool him by her maddening beauty, her irresistible charms, and the nameless fascination that a woman of her stamp would be certain to exercise over a man of Sir Fitzroy's peculiar temperament and easy-going principles.

And thus meditating, they arrive at

Circe's house. Circe has tact enough to leave Sir Fitzroy to the silence he has elected to maintain since they left the Gaiety; she knows perfectly well what has disturbed him, and she is secretly delighted, for she estimates her own powers of keeping the fly, that her charms and attractions have so surely drawn into her parlour and her net, so exactly at their right value, that well does she know that the game is hers: she has only to make her request, to be sure of having it granted; and the reflection is a pleasant one to her. Had she known how entirely Sir Fitzroy's wishes were hers, she would have been even more elated and triumphant by anticipation.

When they arrive at their destination Sir Fitzroy helps Circe out, and they go together into the cosy dining-room, where the *chef*—a regular *cordon bleu*, who permits himself to cook Mrs. Dysart's choice repasts for the extremely under-

paid sum of £250 per annum—has prepared for their delectation a repast that is not to be excelled even in Paris.

They do justice to his efforts, and then return to the drawing-room. For some moments they preserve an unbroken silence.

'A penny for your thoughts, sir!' at last says Circe. 'You look very solemn; what is the matter?'

'Nothing that you can help,' moodily answers Sir Fitzroy.

'Cela se verra,' responds Circe; 'now, I have an idea that I can help you, and that no one else can; shall I unveil my meaning?'

'Do,' replies Sir Fitzroy.

'It is simply this,' answers Circe; 'you are cross because I made you go to the Gaiety this evening, and because your wife saw you with me. Am I right so far?'

'Perfectly,' answers Sir Fitzroy, making the admission grudgingly.

'And,' pursues Circe, 'you do not know how to extricate yourself from your dilemma. You think that your wife, with her old-fashioned notions and her extreme propriety, will—though she knows quite well what friends we are—will be so horrified at our so far ignoring the opinions of those ill-natured people that constitute Society in this modern Babylon—who would be a great deal better employed if they minded their own uninteresting business, instead of interfering in ours—as to defy them, and come here alone, that she will never forgive you or me, and will look upon us both as utterly depraved, and herself as insulted. Is this true, or is it not?'

And Circe looks at Sir Fitzroy triumphantly.

'True, every word of it,' says Sir Fitzroy. 'Now, Circe, it remains for you to find a remedy for my desperate case; it is certain that Mollie will not overlook my

peccadilloes. Will you take pity upon me?'

'Yes,' whispers Circe, 'now and always; presently I shall make my request, and show you a sure way out of all the difficulties that now seem insurmountable to you.'

And Circe puts her arms round Sir Fitzroy's neck, and kisses him softly.

Circe's beauty is like that of some beautiful wild animal: wild passions, evil desires, all unchecked, have obtained such a sway over her, that the only thing she listens to are their evil promptings. This her face expresses plainly; all beauty of the soul seems for ever lost in Circe Dysart.

She kneels by the low chair in which Sir Fitzroy is sitting; she winds her white arms round his neck; she draws his head down until his lips touch hers. She is for the time being as infatuated as he is. She has made up her mind to make him completely her captive, and nothing will turn

her from her set resolve. But the hour is late; they must part.

'You must go, my king,' Circe murmurs; 'until to-morrow, adieu! Now I will tell you my request.'

And she whispers a few words softly in Sir Fitzroy's ear.

That they are strange and unexpected words is evident by the genuine start of surprise with which he hears her communication; he did not think to have his own mad thoughts so graphically and quickly expressed.

'You are mad, Circe,' Sir Fitzroy exclaims, 'to say such things!'

'No, I am not,' she answers. 'I mean every word of what I have said to you. All I want now is your promise.'

'That I cannot give you,' Sir Fitzroy replies.

'You both can and will,' answers Circe proudly, and with determination. 'Do you think that I am the kind of woman

who asks to be refused? No, Fitzroy! events have come to a certain stage. I have made my request, which beforehand you promised to grant: you cannot go back from your word; I will not release you from your promise to me.'

'It's true I did say I would grant your request,' says Sir Fitzroy helplessly; and, after a brief struggle with himself, which Circe watches with the keenest interest, without seeming to do so, he adds, 'So I suppose I must keep my word: I can't break that. Have it your own way.'

'Darling,' murmurs Circe, 'how happy I am! Now I have nothing left to wish for in this world.'

Sir Fitzroy has risen, and is prepared to make a start.

'Good-night, my queen,' he says, 'until to-morrow!' and, kissing her, he turns away.

'Good-night, beloved!' she whispers in

her turn, as the door closes upon his retreating figure.

Then she walks back into the room with a victorious air, a triumphant step, an unholy light in her great eyes, over her whole bearing the stamp of the evil thoughts whose slave she is, and exclaiming softly to herself, 'I think I shall have no further trouble with that fly. I am fond of him; and his strait-laced wife must be made to suffer for her treatment of me since Stepmead, and her contempt to-night. But oh, how easily some men are conquered, and made to dance to the tune we play!'

She proceeds slowly upstairs, undresses, and is soon sleeping as quietly as a child might do: as innocent, to all appearance, as if she had never made a wife unhappy, or ever thought of the request fraught with evil whose fulfilment she has exacted that evening.

CHAPTER VI.

A MOMENT OF WEAKNESS: THE RESULT, DAYS OF ABSENCE.

'And must we be divided? must we part?
Ay! hand from hand, my love, and heart from heart.'
SHAKESPEARE.

MEANTIME what has become of Mollie and Lord Mark? We know the particulars of the time that Sir Fitzroy and Circe spent together, but we are absolutely in the dark, as far as Mollie and Lord Mark are concerned, from the moment of Mollie's departure from the Gaiety.

When they left the stalls, Mollie begged Lord Mark to get a cab and take her

straight home. She knew that Sir Fitzroy would not return for a very long time, and that therefore she would be free from any sort of questioning or interruption, which she felt she could not bear for some hours to come.

Lord Mark soon found a cab, into which they got, and were driven, with the best speed of a doubtful but well-meaning four-wheeler, towards Mollie's Kensington abode.

In absolute silence they pursued the even tenour of their way. No words could describe the keen suffering Mollie was enduring, and equally none could portray Lord Mark's just indignation. She felt most acutely the open insult that had been offered to her, before Lord Mark and all who knew her, by the presence of Circe and her husband at the theatre. Well as she had known of Sir Fitzroy's infatuation, she had, at any rate, given him credit for a greater amount of consideration for his

own well-being and position in the eyes of the world than such a foolhardy course would seem to point out. But in this, as in much else, she had unhappily been mistaken; and both for her own sake and her husband's, she regretted her belief had not proved a correct one.

The drive, even with Lord Mark to bear her company, seems a long one to poor Mollie. The evening has been so full of painful excitement that she feels she cannot bear much more; and yet, Mollie, there is still more suffering in store for you, of a kind you wot not of, even in your wildest moments!

Silently they proceed on their way. In unspoken sympathy Lord Mark has possessed himself of one of Mollie's hands, which he strokes softly, hoping thus to show her how entirely his true sympathy is hers. Now and then, when they pass some lamp that is adventurous enough to give more light than its depressed neigh-

bours, he catches a glimpse of long lashes studded with tear-drops, and then again of bright eyes full of a steady, unflinching light, as Mollie's free hand impatiently dashes away these tell-tale signs of her suffering and feminine weakness.

At last they arrive. Not being expected to return so soon, the house is in darkness and most of the servants out; but Clifford soon puts things to right. She sees at once that something is not as it should be, and she has a shrewd idea that, whatever it is, it has to do with Sir Fitzroy. But she asks no questions, knowing as she does, by long experience, that if Mollie wishes to tell her anything, in her own time she will do so; if she does not speak, it is not for Clifford to ask questions.

'Won't you put on a comfortable dressing-gown, my lady?' is all she asks.

'If you will excuse me for a few minutes, Lord Mark,' says Mollie, turning to him, 'I think I had better do so.'

'Pray don't consider me,' says Lord Mark. 'I want you to treat me as nobody; at least, as a friend that you need not stand upon ceremony with.'

So Mollie slowly leaves the room with Clifford. Wearily she goes upstairs, and, without speaking, lets Clifford begin to help her out of her evening dress.

'You look dead beat, my lady,' Clifford observes. 'You must have something to eat.'

'I couldn't touch anything,' replies Mollie, with a little sob in her throat.

'Oh yes, my lady, you can; and, what is more, you must,' returns Clifford. 'Lord Mark will say I am quite right, I know. You are nearly ready, my lady.' And the faithful Clifford puts the last touches to Mollie's attire. 'Now I will bring up a nice little tray, my lady,' she says, and with that departs down to the kitchen to see what she can discover at this late hour.

Meantime, Mollie proceeds very slowly downstairs; she turns the handle of the drawing-room door, and walks in.

She looks like an angel in her soft white moiré dressing-gown, with old lace all about it. It is a relic of her trousseau, which is only put on on special occasions. Her beautiful hair gleams ruddily in the lamplight, with its varied tints of gold and bronze and red; the soft lips have a pitiful look at the corners, a sort of mute appeal for help; and the big eyes are as bright as diamonds with the excitement of all she has gone through.

Lord Mark comes towards her, and leads her to a comfortable low seat well supplied with large cushions. Into it Mollie collapses, rather than sits; she is utterly weary, body and mind. It seems to her that there is nothing left for her of good, at any rate on this side of the grave; of ill, there may be a large stock still. Of this last fact she has little doubt.

By this it will be seen that Mollie was certainly in a very depressed, desponding state. She felt wounded and insulted, and as sore in heart and spirit as if her husband had struck her in reality.

In a few moments Clifford reappears, bearing a little tray in triumph. She has prepared a dainty little repast, which she places on a small table; and before she leaves the room, she has the satisfaction of seeing that Mollie is eating something, and that Lord Mark has poured out some champagne, which he insists upon Mollie drinking. Thus satisfied, Clifford departs, closing the door softly behind her.

'That is right, Lady L'Estrange,' says Lord Mark; 'you are a good child to do as you are bid.'

Mollie smiles faintly: it is such an inexpressibly sad little smile, that Lord Mark is made quite miserable by it. Mollie sits there thinking over all that has happened.

'Never mind, Mollie,' whispers Lord Mark; 'I know what you feel. Tell me how I can help you—as you would tell Geoff, had he been here; let me help you as he would have done.'

'No one can help me,' says Mollie despairingly.

'Sympathy, at any rate, will help you to bear it,' answers Lord Mark; 'you cannot prevent accepting that. Mollie, what do you mean to do about this evening?'

'Nothing,' answers Mollie briefly.

'How nothing?' inquires Lord Mark, in astonishment. 'You cannot pass over such an event without some understanding being arrived at between yourself and Fitzroy!'

'It is no use talking to Fitzroy,' says Mollie obstinately. 'After all, this state of things has been going on ever since Stepmead. I go out so little, that I had never before seen them openly together,

or heard the delightful remarks that people permit themselves to make, so I suppose it gave me a shock, the event of this evening. But,' she continues, 'I conclude no one else would nowadays think anything of such a proceeding; the morals and customs of the nineteenth century are not remarkable for constancy between husband and wife. I have only heard late in the day the truth which probably any girl who came out this season could have informed me of if I had asked her; the people most concerned are always those who hear these sort of things the last. I shall become fashionable!' Mollie goes on, bitterly. '"What can't be cured must be endured." Fitzroy will never be cured, so I must endure the position; and, as I do not intend to be laughed at by society as a jealous wife, I shall simply take no notice whatever of what I saw this evening—I shall treat Fitzroy as usual. If I could win him back, I would do it,' Mollie

continues; 'but that is a task I cannot accomplish.'

'It is a shame!' replies Lord Mark indignantly. 'Fitzroy ought to be cut by everyone.'

'If all the men who behave as Fitzroy has done,' answers Mollie sadly, 'were to be cut, London society would no longer exist, any more than it would if the women were treated as Circe Dysart deserves to be. Why cannot she leave Fitzroy alone?' Mollie goes on passionately. 'She has been the cause of all my unhappiness.'

'Why,' answers Lord Mark, 'because to a woman of Circe Dysart's temperament, the sight of a happy husband and wife—a real "Darby and Joan"—is an abomination, a state of things that she is incapable of appreciating for herself, and that consequently she will suffer no other woman to enjoy. She never rests until the husband becomes infatuated by her.

She is very beautiful, perfectly unscrupulous, extremely determined; and, to a man of Sir Fitzroy's character, would certainly exercise a marvellous charm and fascination. All this Circe knows; and, by long and varied experience, she knows exactly how to play her cards so as to quickly and surely entrap her victim into the mad caring for herself from which release will be for ever impossible for him; therefore, Lady L'Estrange, you are right, alas! in thinking that to win him back is, at any rate at present, an impossibility. The only thing to be said is, that such women quickly weary of their lovers, once they are sure of them.'

'But this has been going on so long,' says Mollie.

'True,' answers Lord Mark musingly. 'I have never known Mrs. Dysart so persistent before. All the same,' he goes on, 'we must hope for the best. Fitzroy will come back to you, Lady L'Estrange,' he

continues cheerfully, 'never fear; how could he do otherwise?'

'You judge everyone by your own opinion of me,' says Mollie. 'So I am to be pleasant to Fitzroy when he is tired of Mrs. Dysart, or she of him!' and Mollie's lip curls scornfully at the prospect of the very uninviting future she has so graphically described.

'That seems to be it,' feelingly answers Lord Mark; 'anyhow, you are wise and good to ignore to-night, and to try and see what you can do in the future to alter Fitzroy's conduct to you. If ever a woman deserved to be kindly treated,' Lord Mark continues, 'you do. Perhaps some day your life may be happier than it is now.'

At these kind words Mollie breaks down completely, and falls to weeping more violently than she has ever wept in her life before. Lord Mark watches her at first in silence; then, as her sobs increase rather than decrease, he exclaims hoarsely:

'Don't cry like that, Mollie! I can't bear it.'

Lord Mark would give all he possesses to comfort Mollie with tender kisses, fond and loving words. It is simply agony to him to feel that the woman he loves so purely, so much, is made wretched by such conduct as Sir Fitzroy's, and to know that he is quite powerless to alter the state of the case—his very love prevents his helping her.

Mollie still weeps on unrestrainedly: it seems as if, the floodgates of her grief being opened, her sorrow will sweep all before it, that nothing can check the torrent of her passionate grief. It is the misery of years of suffering silently borne, which at last breaks down all barriers with a relentless hand, which will be listened to, which once and for ever demands its right to be heard.

At last Mollie weeps less violently; she gets up, and leans her arms on the chimney-

piece, with her bright head bent down upon them. The violence of her sobs still shakes her from head to foot; but at last they get fewer and fewer; finally they cease, and Mollie, exhausted, lifts tear-drowned eyes to Lord Mark's pitying face.

'Never mind, Mollie darling,' he whispers; 'try and give me a smile before I go; I will come and see you to-morrow.'

And as he speaks Lord Mark lays his hand on Mollie's shoulder caressingly.

After all, while she has Lord Mark she has still much left; without him, what should she do? And as she thinks this, Mollie smiles at him in as hopeful a fashion as she can after her fit of agonized weeping.

There are some moments in life whose temptations men cannot resist. Such a one comes to Lord Mark now. As he looks at Mollie, his arm steals round her waist, her lovely head rests upon his shoulder, the sweet trembling lips are so

near his own: in one mad moment he gathers Mollie into his arms, that have longed so often for such a moment, and before Mollie knows what will happen, Lord Mark presses his lips to hers in one irresistible kiss. He murmurs:

'My darling, I would give my life to help you!' then as suddenly he releases her, and without another word he quickly leaves the room.

Mollie stands like a person who is suddenly bereft of reason. It has all happened so quickly, she is quite dazed, and wholly bewildered. For some seconds she remains so, and then, like a flash of lightning, the meaning of what Lord Mark has done comes to her.

He loves her! By the inward exultation she feels, she knows that such is the case; now she knows what it is that has always made her take a pleasure in his society that she never does in anyone else's; she realizes why he has been so good and kind

to her, ever since the day of their first meeting at Stepmead Abbey; indeed, she has never forgotten him since the day of her presentation, when he picked up the fragments of her broken fan. Was that an omen? Is Lord Mark in the future to wreck her life, even as her fan fell in pieces at his feet? No! a thousand times no! Such a course would be as foreign to his character as it would be to hers. And, as she thinks, she begins to understand what it is that has occurred. She has been angry with her husband—what right has she now to say a word about him? And then suddenly Mollie utters a low cry, and wrings her hands despairingly as she walks up and down the room, for the worst is now come home to her.

The life which but a short time ago she still felt had the promise and possibility of much happiness in the future for her, as long as she had Lord Mark to depend upon, must now be for ever bereft of that

comfort; for Mollie was already drinking her cup of bitterness to the dregs, and with an unsparing hand she laid bare the inmost secret of her heart: she acknowledged to herself how much Lord Mark was, and had always been, to her, and she also acknowledged that never again must she —would she—see Lord Mark!

Ah! the agony of that determination —what it cost Mollie to arrive at that decision. It was like tearing the heart from her body—watching her life-blood ebb away, drop by drop, and feeling that nothing could save her.

Mollie did not, you see, think on these points as most people do nowadays. She had too much principle for the habits of modern society to be possible to her.

Until now, except her father, Geoff, and Sir Fitzroy, no man had ever kissed her; and the revulsion of feeling at learning that such a thing was not only possible, but that it had actually taken place, and that,

Heaven help her! she felt a kind of joy in the knowledge that Lord Mark cared for her, was so great, that Mollie hated Lord Mark for his moment of weakness.

Mollie does not feel as if she could ever forgive him; it seems as if she had touched pitch, and that the contact had contaminated her. She is lost in wonder that the one man in all the world that she had ever felt so sure of, so safe with, should be the person who should give her such a painful experience, and cause her the keenest agony of this kind that she had ever experienced.

Mollie felt so ashamed, so shy, she did not know how to bear herself. How could she ever look or speak to Lord Mark again? And yet, if she refused to treat him as usual—to receive him as she had for so long been accustomed to do, soon Sir Fitzroy would find out that there was something wrong; he would perhaps ask her why she and Lord Mark

had quarrelled; and Mollie felt that she would rather die than let him know the truth.

Mollie was in a nice predicament: a few short minutes ago she had been priding herself upon Lord Mark's friendship, and now—what had that friendship led to? The old days were gone for ever, and in their place Mollie was the miserable possessor of feelings she did not want—namely, remorse and regret.

How unhappy she was! Mollie would have given all she had for Vivienne's presence now, but she had been away ever since Geoffrey's death; and though she was now very much better in health, yet she was not expected to return to England for some little time yet; and more than ever did Mollie long for Geoffrey, her darling, to whom, it seemed to her, she could have related this trouble which had so unexpectedly befallen her—which had shaken in her heart the belief she had in any

human being. To no one else but him could she have told it.

What should she do without Lord Mark? Money difficulties, her husband's open neglect, and the loss of him in whom she believed so implicitly, are the sole items of property Mollie has remaining. She is beginning to understand, in a measure, what she has lost; the full knowledge of the extent of the robbery of all her happy days she has not yet comprehended; only time, and in her daily life the absence of Lord Mark's constant companionship, kind words, and deeds of sympathy, can ever make her fully grasp her unutterable loss and misery.

Until now she has never probed the depth of her affection for Lord Mark and his for her; but never, for one single instant, does Mollie dream of allowing the past again to become the present and future for her and Lord Mark. No; that is for ever over and done with; all

Mollie has to do is to put away the recollection of it, even, from her, as if it had only been a dream. As Whyte Melville says, her happiness, 'Like a dream, it hath fleeted away;' and so she must put it all away from her, and begin a new life that shall hold in it nought but duty and poverty; no happiness, no love, for they could only come to her by Lord Mark. She feels that, as Voltaire says:

> 'Qui que tu sois, voici ton maître,
> Il l'est, le fut, ou le doit être.'

Even this does not make her waver, and, firm in her resolve, Mollie leaves the drawing-room, feeling, as she stands on the threshold and takes in every detail of the furniture of the lonely room—as she recalls so vividly every incident of that brief scene—as those do who in this life take a last farewell of their beloved dead; but with this inestimable difference, that they look forward to a future reunion with their dear ones, that perhaps—for God is mer-

ciful, and many in this sad world are very weary—may not long be delayed. But never again in this world, Mollie thinks, will she and Lord Mark sit there again, never again hold sweet converse as friends, never again meet as they met before those few fatal seconds.

So Mollie, sick at heart, returns to her room and Clifford's quiet care, which has never seemed to her more acceptable than it is to-night. She cannot talk to Clifford of what has happened—the secret is not hers only; she cannot tell her that she is enduring agonies of remorse for what was not her fault, and condemning herself utterly for an event that Sir Fitzroy would simply laugh at, while to her it assumes proportions that simply terrify her. Her only consolation is that she may treat her husband as if she had seen nothing at the Gaiety, since Lord Mark's unlucky kiss. Clifford sits by her until she at last falls asleep.

Sir Fitzroy does not return home until long after Mollie is asleep. He feels very nervous as to the reception he may meet with, as he thinks that Mollie may call him to her room to express her just indignation; and he is much relieved when no one confronts him; he passes into his own room, and goes to bed without seeing Mollie at all.

So ends this eventful evening; but the consequences of all that it foreshadows are as yet to be revealed in the future.

CHAPTER VII.

ABSENT, YET PRESENT.

'As the flight of the river that flows to the sea,
My soul rushes ever in tumult to thee;
A twofold existence, I am where thou art—
Thy heart in the distance beats close to my heart.'

'Brave conquerors—for so you are,
That war against your own affections.
Love's Labour's Lost.

WHAT were Lord Mark's feelings as a swift hansom bore him home? Varied indeed. The blood seemed to run like fire in his veins, the touch of Mollie's lips seemed to have turned his brain. He took off his hat, and let the soft balmy air play upon his brow.

Mechanically he got out of his cab, paid

the driver, and went into his sitting-room. Then he lit a pipe, and, in smoking, began to think. His reflections at first were delightful. He thought only of those seconds of bliss. He felt, 'Come what may, I have been blessed;' and for a long time he sunned himself, figuratively, in the happy days to come. Then to him, as to Mollie, came the revulsion of feeling that must surely follow; and though in his case, being a man, he could not view his act in the light in which Mollie did, yet he saw with horror, and acknowledged with a groan, that with the feelings he knew full well Mollie held upon such a subject, he had small chance of ever being forgiven or spoken to again by her.

Lord Mark realized, too late, how mad he had been. What had possessed him to commit such an act of insanity he did not know. One thing only was certain—that he had, he felt sure, forfeited Mollie's friendship in the future; he had betrayed

the trust Geoffrey had reposed in him. This from him, after he had sworn to himself that Mollie should never know of his affection for her. It was out of all reason to suppose that Mollie could overlook his fault, and restore him to his old place in her esteem again, or ever in the future trust him in the smallest degree.

Such a reflection was inexpressibly bitter to him; the more so that he felt he had brought it entirely upon himself. Far on into the night did he sit and think, and wonder what would be Mollie's decision with regard to the future; for he felt that they could never meet again on the old terms. Where ignorance had produced happiness, now knowledge, brought about by his own folly, had effectually destroyed it.

Lord Mark did not think that Mollie would banish him for ever from her presence, partly on account of what their old friendship had been to them both, and

partly on account of what Sir Fitzroy would say, as any great change in their constant companionship and almost daily meetings would naturally cause him to make remarks, and lead to questions that must never be answered.

Lord Mark got up as he reached this point in his reflections, and sighing heavily, went to his room, where he courted sleep in vain.

Oh, these seconds of folly, how dearly they often cost people! What a forfeiting of certain happiness for a few moments of insanity that must never be renewed! And yet it has ever been so, and so it will always continue to be as long as mortals exist and have human desires for love, and sweet insanities that belong to that maddening stage of existence.

The next morning a note arrives for Mark from Mollie. He, who in other things and events would bear himself with the courage of a lion, trembles at the sight

of the familiar handwriting and the senseless bit of paper, which he feels instinctively holds in its folds all that the future has for him of joy or sorrow.

He turns it round and round, looks at the seal and the writing as if both were something new and strange to him (and so, indeed, he feels they will prove, for up to now Mollie's letters to him have been full of the kindness and sympathy that she used to give to Geoffrey, which she has lavished upon him, and he has proved unworthy), and he dreads opening the harmless-looking epistle more than he can at all express.

However, it must be done, and slowly Lord Mark breaks the seal and reads the contents, and then, with a sigh, puts the letter into his pocket, and sitting down by the table on which is spread his untouched breakfast, he hides his face in his hands; and, as he fully takes in what Mollie's letter means, something that is very like a tear

trickles through his fingers, and falls with a dull thud upon the envelope of Mollie's letter.

What does Mollie say? Only these few words:

'You will feel that, after last night, we cannot meet again. You must have been mad, and I must, indeed, have sunk low in your opinion, for such an act to be possible on your part. We have passed many happy days together. Your friendship was Geoffrey's legacy to me; all—I may say it now, for it is over for ever—all the happiness I had in this world. But you did not respect the barrier which already existed between us. By your own madness you have raised another that can never be set aside. All you can do for me now is never to see me again. Make what excuse you like, only go away from London. Tell Fitzroy business compels your absence; say what you please, but promise

that you will not attempt to alter my decision, for it is unalterable. Perhaps, years hence, if we live, we may meet, when time has made last night fade from our memories.

'God bless you, Mark! I believed in you as I never have in any other man, and never shall again. My reward is, my trust betrayed. My life was wretched; you have made it ten thousand times worse now. There is nothing left but for me to say I forgive you, Mark, which I do most freely; but we part for ever!'

A pleasant letter to get from the one woman in the world that you care about! But all the same, Lord Mark read it over carefully, not once, but many times, and then, his eyes full of tears, he murmured:

'God bless you, Mollie darling! You are right; your decision is a wise one: never again shall you have cause to regret your trust in me.'

Then, full of penitence, he sits down and writes to Mollie, telling her that he will leave London that very evening. He gives her an address that will always find him, and he implores her, if things go badly, to forget his fatal transgression and to remember her old promise to him; and in conclusion he says: 'God bless you, Mollie darling! If you can really forgive me, just write me that blessed assurance, and I shall go away happier than now seems to me to be possible.'

Just as Lord Mark is starting that night, a little note is brought him; he opens it eagerly, and sees:

'I do forgive you; some day we may meet again.'

Comforted beyond words by Mollie's having relented so far, Lord Mark goes on his way, resolved that in the future Mollie shall have no cause to complain of him, and that at no very distant date, if he lives, he will once again hold in the

grasp of friendship the hand of Mollie darling.

Lord Mark has a charming cottage not far from Maidenhead, and there he betakes himself, pleading, as his cause for absence, indisposition, and a desire for rest, and the beauties of a solitary existence in the country, which is quite opposed to his usual habits, and sets everyone wondering what can have become of Lord Mark Champion; and when they hear where he is, excites their curiosity still more as to who the 'lady' can possibly be—for of course these wiseacres and scandalmongers cannot grasp the astounding fact that the 'lady' does not exist except in their own ill-natured imaginations—which all the same, in spite of their obstinacy and incredulity, is nevertheless absolutely true.

Sir Fitzroy and Mollie met next morning. He had the grace to look shy and doubtful of his reception; but to his infinite astonishment, his wife received him

in her usual manner, just as if Circe and the Gaiety had never existed.

'Well!' says Sir Fitzroy to himself, not having the clue to the enigma, 'women are strange beings. I wish I was as sure of a fortune as I am of the fact that, whatever line of action one expects them to pursue, that is the one they immediately elect not to follow.'

And sticking his fingers into his hair, and ruffling it up until he looks perfectly mad, Sir Fitzroy betakes himself with the utmost speed to inform Circe of Mollie's amiable reception, and to spend the day with his enchantress, and wind the meshes of her net still more closely round his infatuated heart; as he observes to Circe, while speaking of Mollie,

> 'I was compelled to her, but I love you,
> By love's own sweet constraint,'

which portrays a degree of gratitude and kind feeling that nothing but a man, or

the different Sir Fitzroys of this world, could be capable of.

Everything brought Lord Mark back to Mollie's mind. It was not long before Sir Fitzroy noticed his absence; and just when he had begun to question Mollie on the subject, a letter was brought to him which proved to be from Lord Mark, and which, happily for Mollie, diverted her husband's attention until her burning cheeks had had time to cool and resume their normal hue, and the contents of which, perused by Sir Fitzroy with many ominous, 'Dear me! Well, I never did!' quite set his mind at ease on the subject. With a running commentary of remarks, a perfect battle of explanations, Sir Fitzroy is graciously pleased to accord to his spouse the sight of Lord Mark's letter.

Mollie takes it with shaking fingers, that she fondly hopes her husband does not see, and mercifully he does not.

He is one of those people who never see

anything unless it concerns them or their affairs, that all paramount thing in their estimation.

Mollie returns the letter to Sir Fitzroy with the original observation that 'she supposes Lord Mark will come back again some day;' for the life of her she can think of nothing more brilliant to say.

Sir Fitzroy stares at her in astonishment.

'Dear me, Mollie!' he at last observes, with the nearest approach to sarcasm of which he is capable, 'you are getting too clever—the "wit and wisdom of Lady L'Estrange"—we shall have to collect all your sayings and print them for the edification of an admiring public. Really, my dear'—this very scornfully—'do take care. Let us have your original sayings in homœopathic doses; I do not feel capable of large doses of such brilliant conversation, such witty repartee, as that last speech shows you to be capable of. I know what I will do,' he continues. 'I will write to

Mark, and tell him to come back by the next train; indeed, I think I will telegraph. I shall tell him his absence has had such a wonderful effect upon your dull brain that I am positively alarmed, and that if he does not come back at once to reduce you to your usual state of stupidity, I positively will not answer for the consequences.'

'Do leave Lord Mark alone!' says Mollie, almost crossly. 'Surely the poor man may go away if he likes without being tormented by stupid letters and telegrams! He could return if he wished; and when he does wish we shall behold the light of his countenance again. Until then, for goodness' sake don't let's talk about him!'

The fact is, that Mollie is always nervous now whenever Lord Mark's name is mentioned, more especially as she realizes that, whether she wishes it or not, sooner or later she and Lord Mark must meet

again, unless she tells Sir Fitzroy the reason of his going out of London; and that she never will do—she would suffer anything sooner than do that.

So the days slip away. Already June has worn to its departing day, and Lord Mark still lingers in the country.

Mollie is deeply and truly grateful to him for so doing, and hails every day of his absence with gratitude to Providence and him. Mollie had finished her book, and, armed with a letter of introduction from Lord Mark, that he had given her some time previously, she one day takes her way to the publisher he has recommended her to.

He is a king among publishers, and receives her with true kindness and sympathy, and gives her every hope that her book will succeed. Blessed and helped by his genial hearty manner, and the apparently inexhaustible fund of wit and humour which he possesses in an eminent

degree, which Mollie most thoroughly appreciates, she returns home to tell Clifford the result of her errand, which seems to be on the high road to success.

In after-days Mollie spends many hours with her good kind publisher, and in after-life never forgets her first interview with him; and the hours spent in listening to his bright and most pleasant conversation are among those that she values the most of her sad and lonely life, for a visit to him never fails to cheer her up.

Never a day passes, hardly a moment, that Mollie does not think of Lord Mark. He had been so entirely part of her life, that in his absence the light seems gone out of everything; nothing is left but darkness and dreariness. It could hardly be otherwise. She could not fail to miss him, with a sense of loss that amounted to downright pain; she had sent him away of her own free-will. She knew she was right there, and he acknowledged that she

was so; but now things had come to a terrible pass with her—debts and difficulties of all kinds were daily and hourly increasing. In spite of all her efforts, she was powerless to stem the torrent which seemed set to her destruction.

Vivienne was still away, and Sir Fitzroy was never absent from Circe. The madness of that night at the Gaiety had been a continued one. Mollie, except for Clifford and Robin, spent her days and evenings in total loneliness, varied only by desperate hard work.

Had it not been for her work, she must have given up altogether. That alone saved her from insanity; for she had nothing left now but the past to look back upon—hardly a ray of hope for the future, for she had never yet allowed Lord Mark to return, sorely as she had been tempted to send for him, to help her in her wretched life of loneliness and heart-breaking struggles.

In spite of all obstacles—and one only seemed conquered for another to crop up: truly her miseries were hydra-headed—Mollie worked and fought on undauntedly. She had Robin, who was dependent upon her, and the house to keep; for it was not much that Sir Fitzroy contributed to the expenses.

Mollie was a wonderful woman—one in a thousand; for not only had she talents, but she had extraordinary energy, and marvellous powers of application and work. Her sisters were all scattered, not having settled after their long trip, so Mollie had no one to help her; indeed, she would not have told them of her troubles—she was too proud. Fond as she was of them, they had never been like the Patriarch and Geoffrey to her; it was a different affection altogether, though a deep one of its kind. There was only one person, except Lord Mark, that Mollie could discuss her troubles with, and that

person was Vivienne. Clifford, of course, knew of the money troubles, and did all in her power to lessen them.

Mollie made up her mind that, if things did not improve, she would write to Vivienne, and ask her to come home and consult with her on the best course to be pursued. But the moment for that had not come yet; so Mollie still delayed, and bore her heavy burden in silence and alone.

The contrast between the past and the present was so marked, that Mollie, with her sensitive nature, felt it all most acutely. Once her days had been all joy and happiness; now through a chain of circumstances over which she had not the smallest control, the reverse of the medal only was hers. What a bitter difference it was!

However, Mollie is as brave in difficulty as she is grateful in prosperity; so she just makes the best of the inevitable, and, as

far as it is possible, tries to put away the past from her as if it had never been, and to live only in the present, in trying to win Sir Fitzroy back, and in unremitting very arduous work. With her heart full of Mark, and replete with regret, Mollie spends many minutes at her piano; and, with tears in her lovely eyes, sings those words of Adelaide Proctor's, which seem so fitted to her case:

'"Oh, these voices of the past,
Links of a broken chain;
Wings that can bear me back to times
Which cannot come again—
Yet God forbid that I should lose
The echoes that remain!"'

With her song comes Mollie's only consolation; and Clifford, as she steals in quietly, and watches the rapt expression of Mollie's face while she sings, recognises that here is a sorrow—a regret—that God only can cure, or make bearable in this world.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FRIEND IN NEED, AND A FAITHFUL SQUIRE.

'True friends visit us in prosperity only when invited, but in adversity they come without invitation.'

THEOPHRASTUS.

'I have not joy'd an hour since you departed,
For public miseries and for private fears;
And this bless'd meeting has o'erpaid them all.'

DRYDEN AND LEE.

'CLIFFORD,' says Mollie, one morning in the middle of July, 'I haven't got a penny in the world. What shall I do?'

As poor Mollie asks the question she looks in despairing fashion at faithful Clifford, as well she may.

'Goodness me, my lady! you don't say so!' exclaims Clifford, in dire distress.

'It is perfectly true,' rejoins Mollie;

'and what is more, I have no one to help me, and not a sixpence coming in for some little time to come.'

'Well, my lady,' answers Clifford, with decision, 'we have weathered many storms together; please God, we shall get out of this difficulty somehow. What about your book?'

'It won't be out for another two months, even if it is accepted, which I am not yet sure of,' replies Mollie dejectedly. 'No, Clifford, we must think of something else.'

'We shall find something, my lady, never fear,' answers Clifford; 'we must. I have it!' she exclaims excitedly; 'a friend of mine is lady's-maid to a young lady who is going to be married, and she wants some old lace. It is terribly hard for you, after all your struggles, to have to part with yours; but you know it is worth a very large sum. Will you sell it?'

'Ah, Clifford!' sighs poor Mollie, her eyes full of tears at the prospect, 'it was

my mother's, and I wore it on my wedding-day' (how far off that luckless day seems to our Mollie now); 'it would be dreadful to part with it.'

'Yes, my lady,' replies Clifford, with real sympathy, 'and it is a shame you should have to do such things; but Sir Fitzroy can give you but little, and there are many pressing debts that must be discharged.'

'I know there are,' answers Mollie sadly.

She thinks for a few minutes deeply: then, when she again looks up, her resolution is taken.

'You are right, Clifford,' she says; 'I will sell my lace. Thank you for the suggestion; there is no other way of getting out of my troubles; I would make any sacrifice sooner than owe money. If Mrs. Standish were here, she would lend me the sum I need, but there is not time to get it from her before these bills must be settled.'

'Can't you telegraph to her, my lady?' suggests Clifford.

'No,' replies Mollie; 'Mrs. Standish is moving about, and I should not know where to send the message to. You see, Clifford, all my jewels are sold; the lace is the only thing I have left, is it not?'

'Yes,' answers Clifford; 'I am afraid, my lady, that it is.'

'Well, the sooner the last wrench is made the better,' replies Mollie; 'thinking about it will only make it worse, and won't bring me the money I must have; it is my last hope. Come along, Clifford, and let's get it over.'

So saying, Mollie walks quickly upstairs, and with a firm hand unlocks her lace-box, and takes out the lovely contents. Old lace, that is priceless almost from age and fineness, lies there; some of it is as fine as the threads of a spider's web, in perfect preservation, and as yellow as age will make it. It had been Mollie's mother's, and had descended to her from her mother in whose family it had been for genera-

tions. Old point, Guipure, Valenciennes, Bruxelles, Point de Venise, Point d'Argentin, etc., all lay there in perfect beauty.

Of all the things and possessions she had formerly had, this old lace was her most valued treasure, as it alone remained to her; all her jewels she had sold long before. And now this must go also; there was no help for it.

Very, very sad did Mollie look, as for the last time she handled the beautiful filmy lace, part of which had trimmed her bridal dress, and the veil belonging to it, which had covered her lovely face on that memorable day. But Robin must be clothed and fed; there must be a roof over her darling's head; debts must be paid, the necessities of life procured (the luxuries have long been things of the past), and nothing but the sacrifice of her cherished lace can in any way help her, or bring this ending about.

Often now, Mollie knew what it was to

be literally penniless—absolutely (and this was no figure of speech, no exaggeration, but a very painful fact) without one penny in her purse; and unless she wrote, or painted, now that she had sold everything, until the book came out, she had no means of replenishing the empty coffer.

The Patriarch and Geoff were dead; her sisters scattered; Vivienne, no one at the moment knew where; and Lord Mark (oh! how Mollie longed for the boon of his presence now) she had by her own free-will banished from her—not that she would have allowed him to help her, in a matter of money, but he would have understood and sympathised with her troubles in a way that no one else living could, or would do. And, for a moment, Mollie stands irresolute; she feels that she must send for Lord Mark, bid him come out of exile, and return to her; he will find a way of saving the lace and helping her, and she wants him so much! But not yet will

Mollie give way to her weakness; she will fight on yet a little longer, and even as she wavers, she puts the temptation away from her once more, and turning to Clifford, says:

'I have made up my mind, Clifford, my lace must go; please take it, and pack it up at once. Once that is sold, I have nothing more. In the future, my wits and work alone must enable us to live; for, as far as Sir Fitzroy is concerned, things in the money line do not, alas! improve. I must work harder than ever; we must exist somehow.'

Clifford looks at Mollie with eyes full of true sympathy; there is a suspicious shine in them which savours strongly of tears; and in good truth such is the case, for Clifford cannot see Mollie suffer and not suffer also, and she fully understands what this last sacrifice, this despairing effort, is to Mollie —once the lace is gone, nothing remains. What will happen then, if Sir Fitzroy does

not make more money? Mollie's sacrifice will have been useless, for black ruin must then stare them in the face, and hold out to them the hand of fellowship in the great fraternity of true and terrible suffering.

But it is useless anticipating evil that may perhaps never come; indeed, it is positively wrong. So Clifford departs, taking the lace with her.

A few days later, Clifford brought Mollie a small packet, in triumph.

'What is that?' asked Mollie, in wonder at Clifford's delighted expression.

'Open it, please, my lady,' pleads Clifford.

With fingers that shake with excitement Mollie does so, and finds a neat little packet of crisp bank-notes and bright sovereigns!

'Oh, Clifford, how can I thank you enough!' says Mollie. 'What should I do without you?'

And Mollie suddenly bursts out crying,

and sobs as if her heart would break. The gold falls off her lap, and disappears into odd corners of the room, and the notes dispose themselves into a little white heap at Mollie's feet.

The relief which Mollie experiences at seeing in her possession the means of extricating herself from the worst, at any rate, of her money troubles, and so giving herself a chance of now getting quite clear by her earnings, and being able to live comfortably in the future, without owing a penny, or ever being in difficulties again, is too much for her.

The tears which terrible debts and troubles have never drawn from her eyes now rain in torrents down her lovely face; indeed, she cries as if some awful misfortune had befallen her.

By this time Clifford is quietly crying also. Soon they will both dissolve in a tempest of grief. Mollie is the first to recover herself.

'Oh, Clifford!' she says; 'am I not a goose? I am literally crying for joy! The relief of having that money is more than I have words to express.'

'I know it is, my lady,' answers Clifford, wiping her eyes and smiling once more. 'I can quite understand what you feel. However, don't let us think of money worries again. You can get nicely straight now, and keep things going comfortably, and never be in this terrible position again. Why, my lady,' Clifford goes on, 'perhaps the worst is over. I sincerely hope it is, for I know what your life is and has been, and how you have worked and do work. Perhaps now Sir Fitzroy will be able to get more money. I shall yet live to see you quite rich, my lady.'

'Never that, I am afraid,' replies Mollie smiling; 'but as long as I can pay my way, I don't care about anything else.'

'That I feel sure you will be able to do,' answers sanguine Clifford.

And then the two have a long talk as to ways and means, and all the things that this wonderful money is to accomplish. Together they pick it up once more, count it, and find that the sum is correct; and then Mollie locks it up, after keeping out a needful sum for present necessities.

Next day she and Clifford intend to devote to the heavenly task of clearing the debts and difficulties away. Mollie can hardly believe in her good luck. What should she do without Clifford, whose suggestions are so practical, and whose advice is full of real good sense?

That evening Sir Fitzroy dines with Circe; but Mollie feels so happy that she does not even mind this. She has a famous romp with Robin, and then carries him off to bed and sits by him, singing him lovely songs until he falls asleep.

What a little angel he looks! one dimpled arm above his head, supporting the exquisite baby face, the other fat hand

flung outside the coverlet, a white woolly sheep, his especial pet, clasped tight in his rosy fingers, a soft flush on his cheeks, silky lashes sweeping his face, and a heavenly smile on the parted lips that seems to say that Robin sees something in his dreams that is hidden from mortal vision.

And so no doubt he does. These living flowers, which God lends for a time to sad men and women to brighten their lives, are blossoms direct from the heavenly garden, whose beauty and sweetness are embodied in them. What would this world be were it not for the children? Like darkness without light, like winter without summer, like life without eternity!

Thank God for these little ones, these 'pearls without price'! To have them is to be rich indeed, to own that which is 'far above rubies.' And Mollie stoops down and imprints a long loving kiss upon

the child's soft upturned mouth, and then leaves him to his happy sleep.

Next day Mollie is up very early. She is impatient to begin her pleasant task. She has not seen Sir Fitzroy since the previous day, and therefore has had no chance of telling him that she has sold her lace.

She dresses quickly, and looking lovely in her simple, perfectly fitting dress of pale blue cotton, she proceeds downstairs in search of her truant knight. She expects to find him, as usual at this hour, occupied in doing justice to the good things which constitute his breakfast, that have been provided for him by Clifford's care and executed by the cook's talented powers. But Sir Fitzroy is not there, nor is he anywhere to be found.

'How very odd!' thinks Mollie.

'Clifford!' she calls, 'is Sir Fitzroy gone out?'

'I believe so, my lady,' answers Clifford from upstairs.

'Very tiresome!' rejoins Mollie. 'I particularly wanted to tell him about that money before he went to his office; however, it can't be helped, as he has departed in such a desperate hurry!' and Mollie sits down philosophically to her solitary breakfast, that does not take long.

When it is over Mollie departs in search of Clifford to see after Robin and give some necessary orders; and then she goes into the drawing-room and occupies herself with beginning to arrange all her business for the afternoon.

Luncheon is over. Robin has been her companion at that meal, which makes his dinner, and has proved himself a very amusing and agreeable, if somewhat exacting, cavalier. More than ever is he full of his 'magpie' tricks, the consequence of which is, that for days after Mollie cannot discover a single thing she wants, so

effectually has the little monkey hidden in his favourite haunts all her available property.

Having finished their repast, Mollie takes him on her back—his pet mode of progression—and has just got her foot upon the first step of the stairs, when she hears the latch-key turn in the lock, and in another moment Sir Fitzroy comes in.

'You come home, Fitzroy!' says Mollie in astonishment, as he never graces his mansion by his presence after eleven until dinner-time, unless anything very especial has happened.

That such is the case now Mollie sees at a glance.

Sir Fitzroy does not answer her.

'Good heavens!' exclaims Mollie, looking at her husband, 'what is the matter? You are ill!'

And Mollie calls Clifford; and giving Robin into her charge, she goes up to Sir Fitzroy, and putting her hand gently upon

his arm, draws him quietly into the drawing-room. Then she pours him out some wine, which she makes him drink; and kneeling by him, she begins to chafe his hands in her warm ones, for, though it is July, his hands are as cold as ice.

All this time Sir Fitzroy has not opened his lips. He seems like a person suffering from an unexpected and crushing blow, and as if all power and sense had left him.

'What is it, dear?' asks Mollie tenderly.

True woman and true wife as she is, in presence of this calamity—for she instinctively feels it is one, although as yet she is absolutely ignorant of its nature—she forgets herself, and she likewise forgets all the unkind treatment and cruel neglect which have been the sole reward meted out to her by Sir Fitzroy. All she knows or cares about now is, that he is her husband; once he cared for her in his own way, and now he is ill and in trouble.

So Mollie puts away the past from her, and only remembers the present, and its demands upon her love and sympathy.

'What has happened?' again asks Mollie, kissing her husband softly as she speaks; and, for a wonder, he does not repulse her.

At last Sir Fitzroy raises his head, and covering his eyes with one shaking hand, as if he could not bear the light, he answers:

'We are completely ruined!'

'What?' says Mollie, as if she did not take in the meaning of his words.

'We are completely ruined!' repeats Sir Fitzroy.

'How?' asks Mollie.

Her throat seems on fire, her lips parched, and she too feels deadly cold.

'My firm has smashed,' answers Sir Fitzroy; 'times have been very bad in the City. They have been reckless in their proceedings, always hoping by

some lucky "coup" to retrieve their shattered fortunes; instead of which, the most complete state of bankruptcy is the result. We are all ruined; for, as you know, Mollie, all my money was invested in the business. We shall not pay sixpence in the pound, and we are literally beggars on the face of the earth, as our income and capital are both gone for ever. I did my best,' he continues, 'to stop the smash, but they would not listen to me, and this is the result.'

'Can nothing be done?' asks Mollie, in a hollow voice.

'Nothing,' briefly responds her husband.

'God help us!' says Mollie; 'what are we to do?'

'I don't know in the least,' says Sir Fitzroy gloomily; 'we must think of something.'

Then Mollie tells Sir Fitzroy about her lace, by the sale of which she had hoped to extricate herself and her husband from

all their difficulties. Now it will be but a drop in the ocean; for though it may help to swell the sum total that they can give up to their creditors, it will not pay all, and they are positively without income of any sort or kind in the future, except what they may earn; and unless their work is fixed, and for certain pay, their earnings are no income at all.

It certainly is a prospect to appal the stoutest heart. So Mollie thinks; and it is indeed a contrast to all her joy of only a few hours ago.

Mollie gets up, and with a weary sigh kisses Sir Fitzroy, and tells him that she will go and talk to Clifford, and see what can be done. For once in his life Sir Fitzroy looks at his wife gratefully. For the moment, at any rate, misfortune has softened him: he becomes more like the Fitzroy of old days and Earlston; and as Mollie passes him to leave the room, he

draws her to him, and holding her in his arms, says :

'You are a good sort, Mollie. I will try and behave better for the future.'

Then he kisses her, an honour he has not accorded her for years, and releases her abruptly. With eyes full of tears, and pleasure at her heart at Sir Fitzroy's conduct, Mollie runs upstairs to tell Clifford the bad news. Clifford is horrified, and no wonder. She has been waiting anxiously to know what can have happened, and what Mollie tells her is far worse than anything she had thought of.

For a long time they talk and consult together; but turn it which way they will, one thing is very evident, and that is the fact that Mollie and Sir Fitzroy, through no fault of their own, are utterly ruined; that the house must be given up, everything sold to pay their creditors, and a new home found. Where? Neither Mollie nor Clifford can imagine.

It seems hard to lose all after all her struggles and sacrifices; and Mollie thinks, as she looks round on all the things that have made her home so pretty, that she has never before thought how comfortable and lovely it all was—how entirely a possession to be desired; so true is it, as Shakespeare says:

> 'What we have, we prize not to the worth
> Whiles we enjoy it, but being lack'd and lost,
> Why, then we rack the value.'

Alas! it is even so; it is not until we have lost all that we fully appreciate its real worth. This was now Mollie's unfortunate experience.

The days slipped by after this fatal afternoon; a few days more, and Mollie and Sir Fitzroy, Robin and Clifford, would no longer have a roof to cover them. The day of the sale had been fixed, all the arrangements made; it wanted but a day more to their final desolation.

After the first shock was over, Sir Fitz-

roy, infatuated man! had returned to find comfort and consolation for the freaks fortune had played him in the presence of Circe.

'It's no use my doing anything,' was all he said, when Mollie came to him to know his wishes on different subjects, his decision upon certain things; 'manage it all your own way. I am broken-hearted; I cannot see anyone, or talk to anybody.'

So, man-like and coward-like, he shifted the burden off his own shoulders on to his wife's. Therefore she and Clifford did everything — saw to all the necessary changes; in fact, did all that they must have done had Sir Fitzroy not existed. And he forgot Mollie once more in Circe's home and in contemplating Circe's beauty. And Circe drew the meshes of the net she was making one by one, day by day, tighter and tighter; soon her fish will be landed—her request will be granted. She

is not the woman to alter a decision once made, or to allow the victims of her allurements ever to escape her when she has once cast her eyes upon them; and whosoever else she may have tired of (in point of fact, their number has been like the stars in multitude), she is not, for some wonderful reason and strange persistence known only to herself, tired of Sir Fitzroy—she never means to let him go; his days are numbered, his doom sealed and certain.

Mollie has written to Vivienne, to the only address she has, for she knows she not only would, but could, help her, and put things right; but she has had no answer from her. Twenty-four hours more, and it will be too late—all will be sold; the new life for Mollie, and those belonging to her, will have been begun.

About seven o'clock—the last evening that she will pass in her old home—Mollie is standing in the drawing-room by the

window, gazing out with sad eyes. All her pretty things have disappeared; the few that are relics of her father and Geoffrey she cannot part with. They are packed up ready to be taken away next day: the room looks so bleak, so desolate! That a struggle, and no light one, was going on in Mollie's mind was quite evident; and it seemed as if, in this instance at any rate, duty, however disagreeable, would triumph.

There is many a well-won battle fought out in many women's determination to do right at all costs which the world never dreams of—which is heralded by no fanfare of trumpets, no shouts of applause, when it is over, from rejoicing people. And this struggle was one of them.

Mollie looked so lovely as she stood in the window, the crimson curtains and old oak making a frame to her rare perfection of face and figure. How Titian would have revelled in her beauty!—her com-

plexion, like a new-blown rose; her glorious hair, with its warm red-bronze tints, rippling all over her head, and lying in soft crinkly curls on the broad white brow; the deep blue eyes, with well-arched eyebrows, and eyelashes like silk —they resembled Geoffrey's—sweeping her cheek; the shapely hands; the tall, slight, though stately, figure; the rounded bust, and tiny feet.

'To do my duty in that state of life into which it shall please God to call me,' Mollie murmured low to herself. 'It is certain, then, that I must not send for Lord Mark; and yet,' sighs Mollie, 'I would give anything I still have left in the world to see him again: he would save us, even now. Oh, if only he and Vivienne were here!' and poor Mollie sighs deeply as she muses.

Even as she thinks, the door opens softly. Mollie is so buried in her own thoughts that she hears nothing, and

remains motionless. She stands quietly, her lovely figure shown to advantage by her simple black dress, her grand head slightly thrown back, her sweet lips just parted, as a sigh escapes them. Thus she appears, 'noble in her poverty.'

And so Lord Mark finds her—for he it is who, unperceived, has opened the door—and remains gazing at the woman who is more dear than ever to him. With him is Vivienne.

Some slight sound makes Mollie turn round, and she sees—she can hardly believe it for joy—Vivienne and Lord Mark, the only two people that she desired to behold in this world.

With a cry of delight, Mollie throws herself into Vivienne's outstretched arms, and sobs as if her heart would break. Vivienne kisses and soothes her, though she has tears in her pretty eyes also; and as for Lord Mark, he begins to feel that if this kind of thing is to go on much longer

he will be obliged to embrace them both, as he does not at all approve of being left out in the cold in this fashion. However, mercifully for his powers of self-control and his chances of being restored to his old place in Mollie's esteem and friendship, he wisely refrains from his very natural impulse.

'You must stop crying, you naughty Mollie!' exclaims Vivienne at last; 'you will be quite ill.'

'Won't you say a word of welcome to me, Lady L'Estrange?' asks poor Lord Mark.

Thus exhorted, Mollie consents to be comforted, and lifting two wet, shy eyes to Lord Mark's, she says:

'I am so glad to see you again, Lord Mark,' and puts out her hand, which he takes, and nearly crushes in the cordiality of his grasp.

Mollie's words were few, but somehow Lord Mark knows that, though neither he

nor Mollie can ever forget the past, or the reason why he went away, she has fully and freely forgiven him, and that once more he will be blessed by seeing her every day, and by the delights of her presence and friendship; and at the prospect he feels as if he must really dance with joy and sing with happiness.

Then they all sit down.

'I don't understand now,' says Mollie, 'how it was that you and Lord Mark arrived here at the same time.'

'Very likely not,' says Vivienne; 'I have only arrived about two hours. I came off to see you at once, which you might be sure I should do, and driving here I saw Lord Mark. I stopped him, and found out he was on his road to you, so he drove here with me.'

'You did not get my letter, then?' inquires Mollie; 'you do not know what has happened?'

'I got no letter, but I know what has happened,' replies Vivienne.

'Who told you?' asks Mollie, in a maze.

'Lord Mark,' replies Vivienne, indicating that gentleman with a nod of her head.

More and more astonished, Mollie looks at Lord Mark for an explanation, which he hastens to give her.

'I had been away for a few days,' he says simply, 'and only returned home this morning. The first thing I saw was a letter from a friend, who told me that the firm to which I knew Fitzroy belonged had smashed; and as I was aware that all your money was sunk in it, I understood at once that you were ruined, and I came off instantly to see what I could do for you.'

Lord Mark makes his explanation as if it was the most natural thing in the world that he should help Mollie, and so indeed she feels also.

Mollie gives him a grateful look. With La Fontaine, she thinks, 'Rare is true

love; true friendship is still rarer.' To Mollie it seems as if she was in luck, for she knows, though she tries hard to deny it, that in Lord Mark's constancy to her she possesses both. Lucky, much-to-be-envied Mollie!

Then the three discuss all the sad business, which Vivienne and Lord Mark soon arrange. Vivienne is an heiress; her money is quite independent of Norman's—not that he would not too gladly help Mollie in any way. The sum needed to put all right, though nothing to some fortunate people, is a load indeed to Mollie; but Vivienne could pay it if it was many times as much, and all the necessary arrangements are made in a very short time.

'Now, Mollie,' says Vivienne, seeing that Mollie is about to speak, 'not a word of thanks; you would do as much for me if I needed it.'

'I won't thank you, because I can't,' says

Mollie chokily; 'but I shall pay you back, if I live, please God.'

'All right,' replies Vivienne, 'we can see about that later; meantime, all you have to do is to what Norman calls "grin and look pleasant;" unpack the furniture, stop the sale, tell the house agent you never intend to part with the house; get some servants, and entertain me and Lord Mark at dinner as quickly as may be.'

Mollie hugs her tenderly, and promises instant obedience to her programme.

'I must see Clifford and Robin!' exclaims Lord Mark.

'So must I!' echoes Vivienne.

So they are called, and Clifford appears, carrying Robin. Her astonishment is great at seeing Lord Mark and Vivienne, and her delight still greater when she hears that all is happily arranged, and that what has appeared inevitable—that she has so much dreaded—is not to be. As for Robin, he gives a scream of joy that

could easily be heard at the other end of the street, and flinging his arms round Lord Mark's neck, he nearly strangles him with the heartiness of his welcome. Thus happiness is once more held out for Mollie's thankful acceptance.

'You and Fitzroy had better come and dine with me this evening,' says Vivienne. 'You will come also, Lord Mark, will you not?'

'I shall be delighted,' he answers.

'So shall I,' says Mollie. 'I will ask Fitzroy when he comes in; but I know he is dining out.'

'No need to ask where,' thinks Vivienne to herself; but all she says is, 'Bring him if you can, Mollie. Now I must go.'

So away she goes, escorted by Lord Mark, leaving Mollie in a perfect tumult of happiness and gratitude.

When Sir Fitzroy comes in he is completely dumbfoundered with the turn events have taken. He declines the invitation to

dinner, as Mollie knew he would; but he sends a message of heartfelt gratitude to Vivienne, who has done so much for him. Mollie tells him that it is arranged that they remain where they are: Vivienne will lend them the money to pay everything; and Norman thinks he knows of work for Sir Fitzroy, which will put all right in the future.

Sir Fitzroy goes off to tell Circe of all that has happened, and Mollie goes to dress. She almost dances upstairs: her feet do not seem to touch the ground, so great is her delight, so intense the relief to her burdened spirit. She attires herself in a dress that she has never worn since Lord Mark left. It was a favourite one with him, and the sight of it has been so painful to her in consequence. But to-night she wears it gladly: her difficulties are over, her friend is with her again; and now that he is with her once more, she realizes to the full what a barren desert life has been

to her without the sunshine of his presence over all.

The dress is soft white gauze, with masses of old lace (all she had left), and in her bosom reposes a knot of clove carnations. Very lovely she looks. 'It never rains but it pours;' and there seems to-day no end to the favours Fortune showers upon Mollie, for the post arrives just before she leaves. Clifford brings her a letter. Mollie's face lights up as she reads the contents.

'Hurrah, Clifford!' she exclaims; 'my book is taken! I am so happy!' And she looks quite radiant as she speaks.

'I told you you would succeed, my lady,' says Clifford, no less pleased; 'and you see I was right.'

'You always are,' says Mollie, proceeding downstairs.

A few minutes bring her to Vivienne's house, where Lord Mark and Vivienne fully share her delight about her book.

The evening passes too soon ; at last they part, with fond words from Mollie to Vivienne of gratitude for all she has done. Then Lord Mark takes her home.

How natural it seems to see him again, to feel the touch of his fingers upon hers, to read the pleasure in his speaking eyes ! So they arrive at Kensington. Sir Fitzroy has not returned. Lord Mark comes in for a few minutes, and then leaves, with the promise of seeing her next day.

And Mollie lies down to rest with a heart full of boundless gratitude to God, who has answered her prayers so wonderfully, and helped her to do right. As she falls asleep, she seems to hear 'Good-night, Mollie !' in Lord Mark's rich voice ; and so she is happy.

CHAPTER IX.

ALAS! HOW EASILY THINGS GO WRONG!

'Cet homme n'a point d'âme,
C'est un monstre.'

V. HUGO.

'Every inordinate cup is unbless'd; and the ingredient is a devil.'

Othello.

VIVIENNE was as good as her word; and the next few days saw all Sir Fitzroy and Mollie's money difficulties definitely arranged.

The relief that it was to Mollie no words could describe. Once more she regained something of the old joyousness that had made her so winning in the happy days at Earlston; and that after Geoffrey's death, and when all her trials had come upon her,

had seemed to bid fair to be definitely extinguished.

Her book appeared in due course, and met with a greater success than in her most sanguine moments Mollie had ever dared to hope, and she has definitely taken to writing as a profession. It is one she delights in; and she is never so happy as when she has a pen in her hand, and swiftly commits to paper the thoughts of her busy brain; and by this means Mollie hopes soon to make a good and certain income.

The plans for work for Sir Fitzroy are not yet fully matured, but Norman has not forgotten his promise; and now that Vivienne is back in England a few weeks will not matter one way or the other, as she takes good care that Mollie has all she wants in every way.

In this way does Vivienne discharge her debt of love to Geoffrey: by helping the sister whom he loved so devoutly, as

truly as he had Vivienne herself. Vivienne had never recovered Geoffrey's death, and she never would. While he had been living she had never truly understood the extent of his devotion to her; but that sad day she had realized it all in one swift thought as she gazed her last look upon earth upon the cousin, companion and friend, every beat of whose honest heart had been for her, and her only. She still wore, and ever would wear, a little locket with her picture and Geoffrey's, with locks of their hair, and a spray of forget-me-not on the lid, that she had given Geoffrey, which was resting on his faithful heart when it beat for the last time, which Lord Mark had brought to her.

It is now the end of August. A month has passed since Vivienne's return. It has been a gloriously happy one to Mollie, for it has been spent in the society of those she loves best in the world, and who love

her. Ah! in that 'who love her' lies the secret of Mollie's happiness! She feels that it is good to be alive; and her heart, warmed by the human love which is a reflection of the Divine, goes out in joyous inexpressible thankfulness to the good God who has helped her so unsparingly.

The past, with all its sadness, seems like a bad dream to Mollie, from which she has been mercifully allowed to wake to bright suns and glorious days. But there is always a crumpled rose-leaf to everyone's happiness, it cannot be otherwise this side of the grave; and Mollie's thorn to her rose is Sir Fitzroy's increased infatuation for Circe Dysart.

For a few days after Vivienne's return, out of gratitude to her and all she had so generously done for him, he forbore to devote himself entirely to her; but as the first sense of the benefits conferred upon him lost its novelty, he gradually, but surely, renewed his old habits, and in the

company of the Siren he once more, and this time more effectually than ever, forgot the wife who had behaved through all so well and nobly to him, forgiving things that few women could or would ever have overlooked, much less forgiven. Every day is spent with Circe, every evening also.

Sir Fitzroy's madness is more than ever the talk of everyone. It is useless speaking to him. Circe is all-powerful; she allows no one to interfere with her victim.

One evening, at the end of August, Circe and Sir Fitzroy are spending their evening together. Dinner is over. It is a brilliant moonlight night, and Circe has elected to open all the drawing-room windows and have no light in the room, the only light being from the sky.

It is a perfect evening, and has succeeded a lovely day. The countless stars which gem the sky twinkle softly, the silver moon sails along in silent majesty. Over-

head all is peace and purity; on the earth is passion and unrest.

Circe is in one of her worst, most passionate humours. She is absolutely reckless of consequences; all she cares for is having her own way, and that, come what may, she is determined to get. And where exists the man who shall gainsay or resist her, when she is in this most insane frame of mind?

If he exists, certainly Sir Fitzroy is not his representative. On the contrary, Sir Fitzroy, as he leans over Circe and imbibes the dose of insanity with which her mere presence inspires him always, thinks, as many men have done before—nay, will do again—that all they will ever know of heaven upon earth is comprised in her lovely face and figure, her extraordinary charm of manner.

That she possesses this glamour, and can exert it over the minds and souls of men to their detriment, body and soul, is, alas!

an undisputed fact, proved by the testimony of the countless numbers who have suffered keenly from it, and therefore estimate it at precisely its real value.

Circe looks up at Sir Fitzroy with those wonderful eyes of hers, that seem to divine every thought of his soul, every desire that passes through his mind, so that to tell her anything but the truth on all subjects would be useless, for Circe reads Sir Fitzroy like an open book spread out before her.

She is evidently in a mad mood to-night.

'Darling,' she murmurs softly, 'you promised to fulfil my request whenever I wished. The moment has come now; I claim the fulfilment of your word. You must come away with me; leave your wife, whom you do not care about, and spend your future life with me. I have plenty of money. How happy we shall be!' And Circe laces her white arms

round Sir Fitzroy's neck, and lays her head restfully upon his broad breast.

This, then, was Circe's request, nothing less than that Sir Fitzroy should elope with her, should give up home and child, and offer this crowning wrong to the woman who had behaved so well, so nobly, to him! This was Circe's revenge, planned from the days at Stepmead Abbey, and brought to perfection by constant companionship; and if she had ever wavered for a moment, the night at the Gaiety had clenched the matter, and made her evil thoughts more fully developed.

And Sir Fitzroy was sufficiently infatuated, and wicked and mad enough, to do this great wrong! He was of a jealous, suspicious nature, selfish and exacting, and though, in a way, he had once been fond of Mollie, yet he looked upon her as a machine, a sort of head-servant, in his household. Such treatment was inexpressibly galling to a fine noble nature

like Mollie's. She could not understand, though she felt keenly, the petty tyranny to which her husband daily exposed her; but by virtue of her sweet nature and temper, she never answered him as he really deserved to be answered, but only strove all the harder to please and amuse him.

Mollie, having once accepted the situation as inevitable, was not a woman who would shrink from her duty, but one who would carry out unflinchingly all she believed to be right. She slaved and worked for Sir Fitzroy and Robin. Nay! would have loved him once more, enough to be content, if he would have let her; but he refused her caresses, took no interest in anything she did except her work, for that meant money; in a word, he made her lonely miserable life ten times more wretched than it ever need have been.

Mollie was so sorry for her husband, with a keen pity that would have helped

him, if he would have let her; with a sorrow for his aimless life that might in time have been his saving, if only he could have understood her; and how hard and unremittingly she struggled, how one day, again, she might have loved him!

But Fate and Circe had ordained it otherwise, and Sir Fitzroy is ready to do her bidding, and forsake his wife and child for her.

So he replies:

'I will keep my word; do not fear, Circe. I am ready whenever you ordain; I cannot live without you. Let us end this farce of pretending not to care. I cannot lead this life any longer. I want to be sure of you, Circe; so that no other man living shall ever be anything to you.' And he holds Circe clasped in a fond embrace. 'I say, with Rossetti,' he goes on,

> '"Not in thy body is thy life at all,
> But in this lady's lips, and hands, and eyes."

Such is my care for you, Circe, and you

only are my life; your presence is my happiness; away from you I am a body without a soul. But this shall be no longer—shall it, sweetheart?'

'No!' replies Circe passionately; 'after to-night we will be together for evermore. No one else shall have power to prevent our happiness.'

So for some time they talk on. They discuss their plans and their future, without so much as a thought to the fearful wrong they are contemplating; all they think of is their own feelings and wishes. What an awful fate they are mapping out for themselves! What a reward to Mollie for the sacrifice of her whole life! But 'when passions trance,' all sense of right and wrong seems swept away.

Such a nature as Circe's could know no remorse; she was so thoroughly unprincipled, vain, and selfish, that such a feeling could have no place in her character. Mollie would have experienced remorse if she

had not sent Mark away from her. Her romance, if yielded to, might have waned like a summer-moon, and she would have been left with every feeling and longing for ever unsatisfied.

Circe knew what was right and kind and good, as well as Mollie did; but there was this difference, that though both women might be tempted to do wrong, might be compelled, so to say, to do so, yet Circe would always give way to her uncontrolled passions. Mollie never would. In this lay the difference between them—and it was a great one.

Then the parting-hour arrives. For the last time Sir Fitzroy and Circe are to say good-bye. This time to-morrow they will have thrown right and principle to the four winds of heaven.

Sir Fitzroy kisses Circe's lovely face many times.

'Good-night, sweetheart,' says Sir Fitzroy; 'good-bye until to-morrow; a

few short hours, and we will part no more.'

She returns his embrace; and then he pushes her gently aside, and goes away swiftly.

Under the balcony he stands and wafts her a last kiss, as she leans over and throws him a rose that she has worn all night. He raises it to his lips and walks away, back to the wife and child he is so little worthy of.

Mollie, all unsuspecting, is sleeping quietly, dreaming happy dreams, while her husband and Circe make their unholy plans; but 'l'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose.' Who can tell what to-morrow will bring forth?

CHAPTER X.

ROBIN'S VICTORY, CIRCE'S DEFEAT.

'I saw the nursery windows
Wide open to the air;
But the faces of the children,
They were no longer there.'

LONGFELLOW: *The Open Window.*

'For what are all our contrivings,
And the wisdom of our books,
When compared with your caresses
And the gladness of your looks?

'Ye are better than all the ballads
That ever were sung or said;
For ye are living poems,
And all the rest are dead.'

LONGFELLOW: *Children.*

AND then there came a time which to her dying day Mollie never forgot. The day after Circe and Sir Fitzroy had arrived at this terrible end to all their follies was the

first of September. Mollie rose very early, looking as fresh and lovely as possible after her night's rest. Not so Sir Fitzroy. There was an odd sort of hurry in his manner, a kind of nervous unrest, that was very unlike him. Mollie noticed it, and wondered what caused it; but she forbore to ask any questions.

When breakfast was over, Mollie went upstairs to fetch Robin. The little fellow was playing contentedly in the day-nursery with his beloved white-wool sheep, cuddling it in his pretty soft arms, and whispering to it words of baby endearment—cooing over it like a mother over a favourite child. It was his first toy—Lord Mark had given it to him—and his truest affection was bestowed upon it, jointly with his devotion to his mother, Lord Mark, and Clifford. He was very fond of his father—'pretty papa,' he called him—but his affection was slightly tempered by awe.

'Well, my King Pet!' exclaimed Mollie fondly, catching him up in her arms, and perching him on her shoulder, lamb and all, from which elevated position he could survey the world in comfort; 'what mischief have you been up to? I know these wicked little fingers have been hiding mother's things away.'

'King Pet dood boy,' gravely responds the autocrat of Mollie's heart.

'Very unusual event,' laughs Mollie; 'what does Cliff say?'

Robin has cut her name short, and calls her Cliff; he is highly pleased with himself for his cleverness.

'Master Robin has really been very good,' replies Clifford, with a fond glance at her pet; 'he deserves a "caramel," my lady.'

At this Robin shows every symptom of joy. He wriggles from Mollie's shoulder like an eel on to the floor, and raising himself on tiptoe, makes frantic darts at the

'caramel' which Mollie laughingly holds just out of his reach.

'One! two! three!' says Mollie at last; 'now then, darling, catch!'

And this time Robin's efforts are crowned by success, and the much-coveted 'caramel' becomes his undisputed property; which fact he hastens to make patent to the world at large by putting it into his smiling mouth and nearly choking himself in his efforts to taste the delights of his 'sweetie' as speedily as may be. He devours it in an eager manner, highly inconsistent with safety.

However, this difficulty and danger is mercifully averted, and Robin proceeds to embrace his mother heartily, with a series of 'sticky kisses,' accompanied by equally sticky pats on her cheeks from his very dirty little fingers, varied by the pleasing amusement of pulling Mollie's eyes wide open to see what colour they are. This is a process Robin delights in; that Mollie is

not altogether so charmed as her small son and tyrant expects her to be, is very evident from the expression of agony which passes over her face as her eyes are nearly poked out by Robin's fingers in his search after knowledge.

'That will do, my duck,' observes poor Mollie at last, when she can stand it no longer; 'mother won't have any eyes left, and then she won't be able to see to buy "caramels" for her naughty boy.'

Robin sucks his thumb with a gravely contemplative air, and finally sees the force of his mother's remark.

'If Robin poke oo eyes out, no "caramels," no sweeties,' he remarks sagely, with an air of wisdom that would have done no disgrace to Solomon. He still talks indistinctly.

'Just so,' laughs Mollie; 'so you had better leave mother's eyes alone for the future.'

And she departs to the drawing-room,

carrying the little bundle of humanity that she loves so well. Robin lays full length, baby fashion, in her arms, gazing at her with merry eyes, full of fun and mischief; then, stroking her soft face, he says appreciatively: 'Oo is so pitty, mother!'—his nearest approach to a compliment, and valued by his mother from its undoubted genuineness; for Robin has not yet become a humbug. That will be a state of things Mollie hopes to be spared.

Soon comes luncheon, and with it Vivienne. Then Robin has a double amount of kisses and a whole box of 'caramels,' enough to make him ill for a week, bestowed upon him; for, in common with everyone else, Vivienne is devoted to him, and Master Robin cordially approves of her.

The afternoon passes away quickly; Robin goes out in the carriage with his mother and Vivienne, an amusement that meets with his entire approbation; he has tea with her; in point of fact, he bears her

company all the day until his bedtime arrives, and then he insists upon her attending his evening ablutions and toilette for the night.

His tub is his great delight; he splashes the water about in the bath (they have a large bath-room), nearly drowns his mother and Clifford by squeezing the sponge in their faces, and generally behaves himself as badly as possible, with an entire absence of decorum. In his bath he puts a fleet of ships of all sizes, a number of ducks and swans, and shoals of fishes of every kind. Then he makes an island of his sponge, and wrecks the boats against it, to his unbounded delight. This amusement lasts a considerable time, until, kicking and screaming with high spirits, not naughtiness, he is finally fished out of his bath by the long-suffering Clifford.

Then, once again clothed and in his right mind, the little sprite perches himself upon his mother's knee, and proceeds to enjoy

his supper of sponge-cake and sweet refreshing milk. This process over, he begins to look very sleepy, but he refuses entirely to retire to his nest until his mother has sung to him. Therefore Mollie takes him up in her arms. He is clad in his little white night-dress, with a blue flannel dressing-gown over it; his rosy toes are bare; he has crumpled his curls up in fierce array; his cheeks are pink with excitement, and his lovely bright eyes, like stars in their purity and light, are blinking with vain efforts not to give way to the sleep which is slowly overpowering him.

Up and down the room walks Mollie, singing the soft slumber-song which the child loves so well. Soon the tired eyes close, the long eyelashes sweep his pretty face, the bright head drops wearily on to his mother's shoulder. Robin is asleep. Seeing this, Mollie carries him to his very comfortable little bed, and lays him softly down in it, tucks the clothes

snugly about him, and after kissing him again and again, turns away quietly, and so leaves him.

'How he grows, doesn't he, Clifford?' says Mollie, coming into the room where Clifford is busily employed preparing Robin's garments for next day.

'Indeed he does,' replies Clifford. 'He is a darling child, and I hope, my lady, that he will grow up to be a comfort to you and Sir Fitzroy.'

'I trust so,' answers Mollie; 'he has a fine nature, and he is a most affectionate child. I am quite devoted to him.'

'Yes, that you certainly are, my lady,' answers Clifford; 'and I think Master Robin will reward you in the days to come.'

'What should I do if anything happened to him?' says Mollie. 'I couldn't bear it!'

'Please God he will be kept safely!' replies Clifford. 'There is nothing the matter with Master Robin; he is a very strong and very healthy child.'

'But children do get fevers; and do meet with accidents,' persists Mollie.

'Of course they do, my lady,' says Clifford; 'and Master Robin will most likely have illnesses like other children. When he does, we will nurse him, and hope for the best; but until he catches fevers, we won't think about them.'

Cheered from her momentary depression by Clifford's consoling words, Mollie gives another kiss to Robin; and, with a backward glance at her darling, leaves the room, and proceeds to her own to dress.

Sir Fitzroy has not been home since the morning; and, on inquiring, Mollie finds that he has left word that he dines out, and that he will dress at the club.

'Why couldn't Sir Fitzroy say so?' says Mollie to Clifford. 'He knows Lord Mark is coming to dinner. What shall I do? I can't stop Lord Mark at this time of day; it only wants half an hour to dinner.'

'You can do nothing, my lady,' answers Clifford, 'except dress.'

So, rather put out, Mollie begins to dress; but her crossness is of slight duration, and dinner-time sees her in the drawing-room ready to welcome Lord Mark, looking as smiling and lovely as ever.

'You will have to put up with my company only,' she says to Lord Mark, as she shakes hands with him. 'Fitzroy, I find, is dining out.'

'Well, Lady L'Estrange,' says Lord Mark smiling, 'if you don't mind having me, all I can say is, that, for my part, I have no fault to find with the arrangement;' so, well pleased to be together, they go downstairs and have a very cheery, comfortable little repast.

Longing thoughts of what 'might have been' will cross Lord Mark's mind as he sits opposite to Mollie, and gazes upon her fair face; but he tries his best to suppress them, with, however, but very indifferent

success. But he has had his lesson; he has transgressed once: he will never do so again.

This Mollie feels instinctively; and though she feels that he will ever have the same feeling for her, yet that he will never again show his sentiments by word or deed she is certain, so she is quite safe. Consequently she most thoroughly enjoys her dinner, for there is a sort of sense of protection upon her when she is with Lord Mark that is inexpressibly comforting to her always; and after the weeks they have been parted, it is more than ever pleasant to her now.

Dinner over, they adjourn to the drawing-room. Mollie ensconces herself in a low chair, and, folding her hands in her lap, lays her head against the crimson cushions, and gives herself up to the seldom-enjoyed luxury of perfect idleness. It certainly is a rare thing for Mollie to be idle, if only for a few minutes; there-

fore she appreciates her treat to the full.

Meantime, what has become of Sir Fitzroy? He has been wandering aimlessly about all day—restless, unhappy, undecided. Now that he has undertaken to redeem his promise to Circe, he begins to feel wretched and discontented. He dresses at the club, as arranged, and gives his servant a letter, bidding him give it to Clifford, and to be very particular in telling her not to give it to her mistress until she comes upstairs to undress.

Then Sir Fitzroy takes his way to Circe, who receives him, both figuratively and in reality, with open arms. Once again with her, his uncomfortable feelings vanish; he has hardly even a recollection of them, for the spell is again over him, the thraldom in which Circe's fascination always holds him.

It has been arranged that he is to write to Mollie, and break to her that she will

not see him again (this, then, is the contents of the letter which is given to Clifford for Mollie); and that then he and Circe are to drive with all speed to Charing Cross, and take the last train to Dover, from whence they will go abroad.

They do not cultivate secrecy, as it is a matter of indifference to this couple whether their proceedings are known at once or not; anyhow, they are aware that in a few hours London will be ringing with this the latest scandal.

When Sir Fitzroy made his plans, he was aware that Mollie had ordered dinner for seven o'clock instead of eight, to give the servants some time to themselves, which she had her own reasons for doing; therefore he and Circe dined at the same hour, and their repast was very speedily concluded. Dinner over, something possessed Sir Fitzroy that made him feel that, come what might, he must have one more look at Mollie: it would be for the last

time. With him, to desire a thing was to do it; so no sooner did the idea come into his head than he proceeded to put it into execution.

'Circe,' said he, 'I must go home for a moment; we have plenty of time; I shall be back very shortly.'

His speech evidently does not please Mrs. Dysart; but it is not her game to show that she is displeased—plenty of time for that later on, if he does the least thing she dislikes. So she replies:

'Very well, darling; only don't be long. You will not fail me, will you?'

'Fail you!' replies Sir Fitzroy; 'how can you doubt me? Have I not given you my word?' and with a tender 'Good-bye, for the present!' the two part.

Thus it comes to pass that shortly after Mollie and Lord Mark have gone into the drawing-room, Sir Fitzroy returns home.

The drawing-room is on the ground-

floor, and opens with French windows into a large square, which belongs to the houses where Sir Fitzroy lives. He always carries the key in his pocket.

He quietly unlocks the gate of the square, and with noiseless footsteps proceeds across the grass until he is close to his own drawing-room windows, and where, hidden by some shrubs, he can see into the room without being himself seen.

Although it is the first of September, the air is so soft and hot that the windows are set wide open to catch the breeze.

This is what Sir Fitzroy sees. Mollie, resting among the cushions of her comfortable chair, holding against her lips a branch of jasmine. The light in the room is dim; it is pleasant and restful to the eyes. Here and there the gleam of the lamps brings into prominence some bright bit of colouring, some gleam on a silver candlestick or inkstand; a shaded candle throws its rays on Mollie's head, showing

up her bonny hair and making her lovely profile stand out from the background of crimson cushions like a finely cut cameo; and in her simple white dress she is indeed a goodly sight. By the chimney-piece stands Lord Mark. One hand shades his eyes as he looks down smilingly upon Mollie's dear face.

Sir Fitzroy cannot hear what they say; he can only see them as they sit there. As he looks, a great longing comes over Sir Fitzroy. He recognises how good, true, and pure his wife is. For the time being the love he once bore her (though, alas! for so short a time) comes over him again. For the moment he feels that Mollie is his, his very own, and that even now she will give him again, in spite of all, the love that was his at first. He has only to go to her, to take her in his arms, and give her again the kisses that are hers by right; he has but to say, 'Forgive me, Mollie; I have come back to you. We

will begin a new life; the past shall be forgotten like a bad dream;' he has only to do this, and give way to his good promptings, and all will once more be well between them, and Mollie will receive her prodigal with glad rejoicings.

One second more, and Sir Fitzroy will yield to the better feelings of his heart; Mollie will again be enfolded in the arms whose embrace was all she once craved for of love upon earth, whose clasp she has not felt now for so very, very long, that it often seems to her as if she must have dreamt that such happiness was hers; but at this moment, when the good angel has all but conquered, some sudden thought crosses Sir Fitzroy's mind, and Mollie and Lord Mark fade out of his sight like dreams that are vanished and gone, and in their place, radiant in her wonderful and insolent beauty, appears a vision of Circe Dysart.

He seems to see her holding out eager

arms towards him, tempting lips seem to touch his own, and so great is Circe's power over him, that although he knows full well that it is only a creation of his brain that he sees, her inanimate image has greater influence over him than Mollie's animate loveliness, he seems to hear Circe say, 'You will not fail me;' and that settles the question. Sir Fitzroy turns on his heel with a resolute look on his face, and, still unnoticed, passes away from the window.

On the right side of the house, which he has to pass to get to the square-gate, is a flight of stone steps which leads direct into the room in which Robin sleeps. He looks in and sees that the room is empty, save for the little sleeping child. Sir Fitzroy has a key to the door, as he often enters the house by this way, so he opens it softly and enters. He goes up to the little fellow whom he is leaving for ever,

and gazes silently upon the innocent lovely picture Robin presents.

His pretty face is all flushed and rosy with the kisses of the god Morpheus. The tiny limbs are restfully disposed in his comfortable bed: he still holds his adored lamb tight in his baby arms, and a smile plays about his mouth, with lips like twin cherries, and over the sleeping child is that indescribable grace of purity and unconsciousness of evil which only children ever seem to inspire people with.

Well has Longfellow written:

> 'Ah! what would the world be to us,
> If the children were no more?
> We should dread the desert behind us
> Worse than the dark before.'

Most of us undoubtedly would.

For a long time Sir Fitzroy stands motionless. He has a queer tightening at his heart as he looks at the sleeping child —his very own child; and by one of those odd flashes of thought that come to people

occasionally, he seems to take a glance into futurity, into the days that are to come for him, when his legacy to Robin will be that of the man who deserted his helpless little one and his true wife for the wiles and snares of 'the enchantress;' as in a mirror, he sees the time when Robin will be a boy most needing his father's care —how will he have cared for this treasure given to him to love?—and then he sees the day when Robin has grown into a man, and remembers his father's name only with pain and sorrow beyond words to express.

His face expresses the fight that is going on in his weak heart—for his is a nature in which good and evil fight more often, more fiercely, than they do in many instances; but alas! he is so yielding, such a slave to his passion for Circe, that reasoning power seems warped in his misguided brain. With him it is Circe, Circe, nothing but Circe.

'What an idiot I am!' mutters Sir

Fitzroy; 'I shall be late. Some one may come in; I must go!'

So he stoops down hastily, and kisses Robin's parted lips softly, tenderly, lingeringly, and then, without anyone having the least knowledge that he has been home, he descends the steps swiftly and quietly, turns the corner of the house, opens the gate of the square, passes through and closes it, and jumping into a passing hansom, is soon safely once more, and, as he says, for ever, with Circe.

About a quarter of an hour has elapsed since Sir Fitzroy's departure, when Mollie turns to Lord Mark and says:

'I think, if you will excuse me, that I will just go upstairs and see if Robin is all right. You know he sometimes walks in his sleep, which always gives me an uncomfortable dread.'

'Please don't mind me,' says Lord Mark smilingly. 'Isn't Clifford with Robin?'

'No,' answers Mollie; 'she will be

having her supper in the day nursery. Robin has not very long taken to this unlucky habit, and mercifully he generally walks direct to Clifford. Several times lately he has nearly frightened her out of her wits, by suddenly appearing before her like a ghost, robed in his little white nightgown.'

'What do you do?' asks Lord Mark, with much interest.

'Only watch him,' says Mollie; 'to see that he does not hurt himself. After a little time he goes back to his bed, and knows nothing of it all next morning. Once, though, the door which leads from his room by a flight of steps direct to the garden was left ajar, and in his sleep he pushed it open still further; luckily Clifford was in the room, so no harm happened; but had she not been there, in another moment he would have pitched into the garden. You know, we have a paved walk all round it: if he had fallen

he would either have been killed or very badly hurt, for the steps are very high.'

'What a mercy Clifford was there!' says Lord Mark feelingly. 'Shall I go and see if he is asleep, Lady L'Estrange?'

'No, thank you,' replies Mollie. 'I shan't be a moment.'

So she leaves the room quickly and proceeds to her darling.

Lord Mark shuts the door, which he has held open for Mollie to pass, and walks back to the window, where he stands quietly musing on the beauty and graciousness of the charming woman who has just left him, and wishing her—ah! how earnestly—all the good that this world can give her, and for ever a cessation of the troubles that she has always so bravely borne, and striven to make the best of.

Hardly has Lord Mark taken up his place by the window, when through the silent night air rings out a scream, which seems to freeze his blood in his veins,

away up those fatal steps, and lays him upon the small white bed, which his baby steps had quitted so short a time ago. Half an hour ago Robin was a healthy, merry child; now he was hurt, perhaps to death, for he had never moved since Lord Mark first touched him.

Mollie flung herself down by her darling's bedside, murmuring soft words to him, and chafing his ice-cold hands in her loving ones, which, however, from this fearful shock, were nearly as cold as his.

'Robin must have been walking in his sleep,' said Lord Mark, 'and missed his footing at the top of the steps; but who could have left the window open?'

By this time the violent ringing of the nursery bell has brought Clifford running upstairs.

'My lady, my lady,' she exclaims in agony, 'what has happened?'

In a moment the open door and the still form, beside whom Mollie kneels in speech-

less agony, tell her all the awful event, and with a groan poor Clifford almost faints. Lord Mark seizes some smelling salts, and holds them to her nose, and in a few minutes she recovers. No wonder she was overcome, for she was so devoted to Robin.

A few minutes suffice to send for the doctor and for Vivienne. Lord Mark and Clifford do all that it is possible to do for the senseless child, but quite without avail. If it were not for the faint beating of the pulse, to all intents and purposes the child seems dead, for the faint beating alone shows that there is a flicker of life still left in the frail body.

'Do you think he is dead?' asks Mollie, after what seems an age of most agonized suspense, although in reality only a very few minutes have elapsed. 'Will he ever move again?' she says in a broken hoarse voice, very unlike her own. 'Oh, Robin!' she breaks out suddenly, 'I can't live without you; you are all I have in the

world. Come back to mother, my King Pet; look at me, darling—speak to me, or I shall go mad! You will come back to me, my own, won't you?'

Poor Mollie is almost out of her mind with the terrific blow she has sustained, and her imploring prayers to the child she loves so much are enough to melt the stoniest heart; how much more, then, those of Lord Mark and Clifford, who are so devoted to her!

There Mollie kneels, with wide-open, horrified eyes, that can't shed one tear to save her brain from madness; she seems unconscious of all else except the child, unable to see anything but that white heap in the garden, which tells her in silent but forcible language that perhaps she would be called upon to give up her one precious lamb.

'Oh, Mollie darling!' whispers Lord Mark, 'I would give my life to save you this awful suffering! Mollie, try to

bear it; you will break my heart with your look of despair! God is good, Mollie; perhaps He will spare your treasure to you. Trust in Him, dear; for He knows best.'

At these words—and thank God it is so!—Mollie breaks down utterly, and leaning her head upon the bed, she sobs as if she would never stop again. They let her weep, and Lord Mark is quietly thankful that she does so, for much longer, with that awful fixed look on her ghastly face, and in her piteous, agonized eyes, and he knows that unless the relief of tears had come, Mollie must have lost her reason, for the expression in her tortured eyes showed so clearly the brain mischief that was going on.

After a time Mollie becomes quieter, and then she tells Lord Mark and Clifford how it all came about.

'I came straight upstairs,' said Mollie, 'to see if Robin was asleep. The moment

I opened the door, it was shut by a sudden draught of air. I looked at Robin's bed; he was not in it. Then in a second I knew that the door at the top of the steps must be open, and oh, Heaven help me! I knew then what had happened; and in a second I was in the garden, and there I found him lying!' And Mollie shudders most violently as she speaks. 'Then,' Mollie adds, 'I gave a scream—I couldn't help it—and then I called you, Mark; after that I don't seem to remember anything clearly.'

'Who could have left the door open?' says Clifford; 'if it was the last word I ever spoke, I am quite certain that the door was shut, as it always is, when I went down to supper. You know, my lady,' she continues, 'it is never locked until I go to bed.'

'It is not your fault, I feel sure,' says Mollie. 'The whole thing is a mystery to me.'

Robin lies absolutely motionless; there is still the same flicker of life, and that is all. Clifford looks at Lord Mark, and shakes her head.

'It is his brain,' she whispers; 'from the way he was found, he must have lost his footing at the top of the steps, and pitched straight on to his skull.'

'Will the doctor never come?' asks Mollie in agony.

They have done all they know, but no one but a doctor can tell the nature and extent of such an accident, or pronounce an opinion as to what chance there is of Robin's being restored to life. Indeed, to look at him one would say that Robin will never again move from the bed on which his body lies so calmly, so quietly.

So they despatch more messengers for the doctor and for Vivienne, and then resume their awful task of waiting and watching the spark of life which still lingers, of longing for the doctor, and yet of

dreading his arrival, for he may tell them (though this God forbid!) that Robin is doomed—that 'the Lord has need of these flowerets gay,' and that Mollie for ever in this world must part with her one treasure.

It was an awful, an agonizing thought; it overcame Mollie utterly for a time; but then she took comfort in the thought that 'while there's life there's hope,' and as Robin had, in a miraculous way, not been killed outright, that God might give her back her darling.

'Where is Fitzroy?' at last she exclaims (up to now no one has thought of him). 'Some one ought to fetch him.'

'I will,' replies Lord Mark; 'only where am I to find him?'

'He was to dress at the club,' answers Mollie. 'Perhaps his servant knows where he is dining.'

'Oh! I beg your pardon, my lady,' interrupts Clifford; 'but Fielding gave me this letter from Sir Fitzroy, for your ladyship;

but, as he said, I was not to give it to you until you came upstairs to undress. I put it safely in my pocket. Here it is. It may give the information your ladyship wants.'

And Clifford drew a letter out of her pocket, and handed it to Mollie.

Mollie got up slowly, and walked to the table, so that she might read it by the lamp, as Robin's bed was too far off the light to enable her to do so there. She breaks the seal slowly, and begins to read.

Lord Mark is watching her narrowly; he has a feeling that there is something dreadful in that sheet of paper; and hardly has Mollie begun to peruse it, when she gives one piteous moan, that seems to say that the greatest misfortune of all has befallen her. She puts her hands out as if to implore some one not to do something that she alone sees, and then swaying gently backwards, she loses all consciousness, just as Lord Mark, perceiving

what has happened, rushes across the room and catches her inanimate form in his arms.

The letter flutters to the ground, where for the moment it lays all unheeded.

Clifford rushes to Lord Mark's assistance, and between them they carry Mollie to Clifford's bed, on which they lay her, where she remains seemingly as dead as poor Robin may soon be.

They send fresh people for the doctor, and then, while Lord Mark returns to Robin, Clifford busies herself with Mollie; but not a vestige of returning animation does she show. At last, Lord Mark can stand it no longer.

'Clifford,' says he, 'do you think I might read Sir Fitzroy's letter, to see what it is that has brought about this fresh trouble?'

'Yes, my lord, I am sure you may,' promptly replies Clifford; 'otherwise how are we to know what to do for her ladyship?'

'You are quite right, as you always are, Clifford,' says Lord Mark. 'It must be something terrible to have caused Lady L'Estrange to swoon.'

Lord Mark has no suspicion of the truth. He does not think that Sir Fitzroy, unprincipled as he knows him to be, could ever contemplate such a step as eloping with Circe.

However, he stoops and picks up the letter, and sitting down by the table, he proceeds to smooth it out, as the paper is all crumpled up from the violence of Mollie's grasp upon it.

No sooner does Lord Mark begin to read, than he exclaims out loud:

'The villain! the coward!' And getting up, he begins to pace up and down the room.

Poor Clifford stares at him in dismay. What new trouble is she to be called upon to witness? Robin is unconscious—so is Mollie—and now it seems as if Lord Mark,

in whom everyone, Clifford included, was accustomed to look for help and comfort, was going demented also; for he walks up and down, exclaiming in his rage, and really seems out of his mind.

At last Clifford ventures to say:

'What is it, my lord?'

'It is this,' says Lord Mark: 'that wretch Sir Fitzroy—for I can call him nothing else—has eloped this evening with Mrs. Dysart—that fiend, for she is nothing else, has broken Mollie's heart.'

And the expression on Lord Mark's face bodes no good to Sir Fitzroy should he see him again.

'Oh! what shall we do?' exclaims poor Clifford, wringing her hands, the tears streaming down her kind face, from the indignation of her wrath against Sir Fitzroy. 'To leave my dear lady, who has been the best wife to him that any man ever had, little as he deserved it! There is not another woman in the world

who would have remained with him and slaved for him as her ladyship has; and now to think he has left her, and gone off with that wicked woman! I hate her, that I do!' Clifford finishes viciously.

In such fashion does she bear witness to Mollie's goodness, and to her unselfish hard-working life.

'What can we do?' Clifford adds despairingly. 'Oh, my lord!' she says eagerly, 'won't you go and see if you can find Sir Fitzroy, and tell him about Master Robin? Surely he will return then!' and Clifford gazes at Lord Mark as if everything depended upon his answer.

And so in fact it does.

'It is the last chance,' answers Lord Mark. 'Yes, Clifford; I will go and do my best to bring him back.'

So does Lord Mark, as ever, put self away. He only thinks of the woman he cares for more than for any other woman in the world, who is lying there before him

still unconscious, though he and Clifford have done all they know to restore life to her weary spirit.

Lord Mark picks up the letter, and, glancing at the clock, exclaims :

'I may just catch them.'

And with a lingering look at Mollie and Robin, and a promise to Clifford to return shortly, he opens the door to go out. As he does so the doctor and Vivienne appear upon the scene.

'What does it all mean?' exclaims Vivienne in horror, gazing from Mollie's senseless form to Robin's.

In a few words Lord Mark tells her, and adds :

'Clifford will tell you all particulars. I am going to try and stop Fitzroy and bring him back;' and with that he runs down the stairs and out of the house, taking the road to Circe's house on which Sir Fitzroy had driven so short a time before; for all these events had taken but a very short time to

happen, much shorter than they do to write.

The doctor carefully examines Robin; Mollie still remains unconscious.

'Is there any hope?' asks Vivienne, in a trembling voice.

'Very little,' answers kind Dr. Brookes —he is the same doctor who attended poor Geoffrey, and Mollie has been attended by him ever since; 'he has concussion of the brain, and is in the greatest danger; but I will do all I can.'

Then he leaves the room to send for some necessary things, and to despatch a note home to say that he shall remain where he is for the night. Then Dr. Brookes returns to Mollie and does his utmost to restore her suspended existence, for a long time without avail; but at last, after what seems to Clifford and Vivienne an interminable time, with a low gasping sigh Mollie struggles back into this world again, and

the life of pain and sorrow that she would so gladly have laid aside.

For some moments Mollie cannot recall what has occurred. She sits up on the bed; with icy, shaking fingers she pushes away the hair from her brow, and gazes round her in a bewildered fashion.

'Where am I?' she asks; 'what has happened?'

Then her eyes fall upon Vivienne, Clifford, and Dr. Brookes, then upon the quiet form upon the little bed, and with an exceeding cry of heart-broken misery, Mollie remembers all.

She jumps up, and Vivienne holds out her arms to her; and pillowing Mollie's head upon her breast, the two women weep together in silent, but heart-breaking, fashion.

'Don't cry, darling; don't,' says Vivienne, after some time; 'don't cry like that; it is awful. Take heart, Mollie;

Dr. Brookes holds out a hope of Robin's recovery.'

'Heaven bless you for that hope,' says Mollie gratefully to the good doctor, who is blowing his nose in the corner by Robin's bed with unnecessary vehemence.

'He is young, and he has a fine constitution,' says the doctor hopefully; 'please God, we shall pull him through yet.'

'You don't know all,' whispers Mollie to Vivienne, and she throws herself by Robin's side in an agony of trouble and shame at the last insult her husband has heaped upon her, which she in no way deserves.

'Yes; I do know everything,' answers Vivienne.

'Who told you?' inquires Mollie in astonishment.

'Lord Mark,' briefly answers Vivienne.

Then, for the first time, Mollie becomes aware that Lord Mark is not there.

'What has become of him?' asks Mollie.

'He is gone to tell Fitzroy, if he can find him, and to bring him back to you,' replies Vivienne.

'No!' almost screams Mollie; 'I can't bear to see him. Don't let him come here.'

Vivienne soothes her gently, and whispers to her that for her child's sake she must try and forgive her husband, and after a time she succeeds in persuading Mollie to agreeing to see him, if he is to be found. Vivienne has small hope of that herself, knowing what Circe is; but whatever Mollie may arrange for the future, it would be a comfort if Sir Fitzroy would return while Robin's fate yet hangs in the balance.

Mollie returns to Robin's bedside. Then suddenly footsteps are heard outside; Mollie rises; Vivienne goes up to her, and puts her arm round her to support her; the door is flung open, and on the threshold appear Sir Fitzroy and Lord Mark, the former with an expression of agony on

his face, and indescribable shame that no one who sees it ever forgets.

A day of reckoning has come; once again husband and wife are together.

CHAPTER XI.

NEMESIS.

'The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us.'

King Lear.

'Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.'

Henry VI., Part II.

When Lord Mark left Mollie and Vivienne he got a hansom, and told the driver that if he would drive fast to Cromwell Road, he would give him double fare. With this alluring bait held out to him, the Jehu urged his horse to the top of his speed. On they tore, to the imminent risk of their own necks, and the greatest danger to all other passengers.

Thus a very few moments sufficed to

land Lord Mark in Cromwell Road. As they turned a corner he could see a carriage at the door of Circe's house, and with his foot on the carriage-steps stood Sir Fitzroy. It was quite true, then; this cowardly deed had been contemplated and almost carried out by the most unworthy man who called Mollie wife! Lord Mark could no longer doubt; he had the evidence of his own eyes that such was the case.

'Stop! stop!' shouted Lord Mark at the top of his voice.

Sir Fitzroy turned round, and seeing who it was, guessed in a moment that Mollie knew of his intended elopement, and had sent Lord Mark to stop him. He tried to get into the carriage, ordering the coachman to drive on at once. But Lord Mark was too quick for him; he laid a detaining hand on his arm, exclaiming:

'You shall not go; you must hear what I have to tell you.'

'I shall not stay at your bidding,' inso-

lently rejoins Sir Fitzroy; 'I do not wish to hear anything you have to say.' And Sir Fitzroy tries to free himself, and to shake Lord Mark's hand off his arm.

Circe is in the carriage; and, seeing that Lord Mark evidently knows everything, she urges Sir Fitzroy to get in and drive off. Then Lord Mark gets angry, and he exclaims:

'You shall not go, I tell you. Your letter has nearly killed your wife; and, ten minutes before she received it, Robin, in his sleep, fell down the steps from his room into the garden—some one had left the door open—and he has never yet recovered consciousness. There is but little hope for him.'

Lord Mark speaks quickly—he sees there is nothing for it but to be abrupt in breaking the news to Sir Fitzroy—if he delay, his errand will be unsuccessful.

As Sir Fitzroy listens, a look of the utmost horror passes across his face.

'What!' he exclaims. 'Mollie unconscious! Robin dying! Oh, heaven! my sin has found me out—my punishment is greater than I can bear! I have murdered my child!'

Othello says:

> '"Guiltiness will speak,
> Though tongues were out of use."'

So, in his anguish, Sir Fitzroy tells the truth.

Sir Fitzroy, as he speaks, turns from the carriage, and staggers, rather than walks, into the hall, where he sinks upon a chair, and covers his face with his hands. Circe follows him; so does Lord Mark.

'What do you mean, Fitzroy?' asks Lord Mark, softened, in spite of himself, by the exceeding misery depicted upon the other's countenance.

'This,' says Sir Fitzroy. 'I went to have a last look at Mollie and Robin, and I must have left the window ajar, and so caused this awful accident.'

'God help you!' replies Lord Mark, in heartfelt accents of true sympathy.

This is a complication of miseries that Lord Mark had never thought of.

Believing that Sir Fitzroy was dining out—probably with Circe—and in total ignorance of his intended behaviour until Mollie read her letter, no one naturally had ever thought of Sir Fitzroy being in reality the cause of this terrible event. If possible, it made it worse for Mollie; and no one could see Sir Fitzroy and not pity him, and feel for the agony of mind —the tumult of remorse—he must be enduring.

'Come with me, Fitzroy,' said Lord Mark, after a few seconds; 'you cannot do otherwise—every moment is of the utmost importance — if you would see Robin alive.'

Plain speaking in such a case was best —it was no use mincing matters; it was a case where the knife must be used with

decision to save the patient's life. And Lord Mark held out his hand to Sir Fitzroy to help him to rise.

'One moment,' says Circe, barring the way with outstretched hands; 'one moment. May I inquire what is to become of me in this charming arrangement, which I believe to be a "ruse" on your charming wife's part?' putting on an ugly sneer as she speaks. 'Lady L'Estrange knows that Fitzroy don't care for her, and that he worships me, and so imagines that by this trumped-up story, she will get Fitzroy back again; but she is counting without me. Fitzroy, I demand that you fulfil your promise to me!'

Circe's eyes literally blaze in her head with anger; she will make a hard fight for the fulfilment of her evil desires, and her revenge upon Mollie.

Sir Fitzroy looks at her, on his face the expression of an intense contempt. In these few moments his love for Circe

has died out for ever, never to be renewed. A mist seems to clear from his eyes; and in her unkind and vindictive speech—her expressed doubt of Mollie and her claiming the fulfilment of his promise at such a time—Sir Fitzroy for the first time reads Circe Dysart's character aright, and acknowledges that her power over him is gone: that he must have been (which, indeed, he has been) quite mad for a very long time to have left Mollie—his pure, good wife—for such a fiend as the woman who, lost to everything but the gratification of her passions, stands before him now, intent at all costs upon getting her way.

'I will not keep my word to you, Mrs. Dysart,' says Sir Fitzroy. 'I curse the day when, to my own detriment, very nearly to the loss of all I ought to hold, and do hold, dear, I first looked upon your evil, fatal beauty; and from this time for-

ward, God helping me, I will never look upon your face again !'

And he never does. So saying, Sir Fitzroy walks out of the house to the hansom, into which he gets with Lord Mark, and they drive swiftly away, while Circe stands upon the steps and hisses, rather than calls, after them, so lost is she to all sense of propriety; everything is swallowed up in her mad rage.

'You shall rue your day's work. I will punish you yet !'

Sir Fitzroy does rue it, but not in the sense Circe means. She then goes back into the house and sets to work to plot a still more effectual revenge.

For the time being she is forced to acknowledge that the game is lost; but such women as Circe Dysart never acknowledge defeat; difficulties only stimulate the ardour of their exertions after all kinds of sin and wickedness.

What a waste of talents that might

have borne such a harvest of good things! Suffice it to say that Sir Fitzroy never sees Circe again. She has worked him the greatest evil of his life; in this world they meet no more.

Circe has fulfilled her purpose, her place in the scheme of creation (though not in the way she intended); for, if it had not been for her evil deeds, Sir Fitzroy perhaps might never have been an altered man. Out of evil comes good.

On the way to Kensington Sir Fitzroy makes a clean breast of it to Lord Mark. He tells him the whole sad story, all his follies, all his intended evil deeds. He spares himself in nothing.

'Do you think Mollie will ever forgive me?' he inquires sadly of Lord Mark. 'I have treated her so infamously!'

'I am sure she will,' answers Lord Mark, with every sign of sympathy. 'Lady L'Estrange is very different from other people and other women.'

'So she is,' answers Sir Fitzroy; and he adds musingly: 'You always understood her better than anyone else, Mark.'

'I have the greatest respect and affection for her,' answers Lord Mark.

By this time they have arrived at Kensington, and so it happens that Sir Fitzroy and Lord Mark enter Robin's room together.

As she sees her husband approaching, Mollie begins to tremble violently.

'Mollie,' whispers Sir Fitzroy, very humbly, 'what can I say to you? What can I do to induce you to believe in my repentance?'

The others have discreetly gone out of the room, leaving the husband and wife alone.

'You have broken my heart!' says Mollie coldly. 'You could write me such a letter as this,' and she draws the letter from her pocket, where she had put it

when she recovered her fainting-fit, and she reads aloud:

'MOLLIE,

'When you get this, I shall be far away; I shall have eloped with Circe Dysart. I cannot live without her, so it is best to put an end to this state of things. I have behaved like a brute to you, Mollie; but fate is stronger than I am. Kiss Robin for the father he will never see again, and forgive me, if you can, Mollie, for ever marrying you.'

As she reads, Sir Fitzroy holds out his hands imploringly; shame, remorse, agony, all flit across his expressive face.

'Spare me, Mollie!' he implores. 'Oh, if you only knew the agony I have suffered, and do suffer, since I wrote that letter, little as I deserve it, you would pity me!'

'Why should I pity you?' says Mollie.

'You had no pity for the wife and child you have so shamefully and systematically neglected. My life has been a long misery, and then you ask me to pity you!' And Mollie turns upon her heel and stands with her back to her husband.

He comes close to her, and says more pleadingly than ever, as he looks at Robin, who still lies there unconscious:

'You have worse to know of me yet, Mollie.'

And then he tells her, what has seemed such a mystery to her, the cause of Robin's accident.

'Oh, Mollie, Mollie!' cries Sir Fitzroy, as his wife's face expresses more than ever the contempt she feels, 'can you not understand that I should come and take, as I believed, my last look on you and Robin? Can you not pity such a wretch as I am? Think of what my future life will be if you cast me off, with perhaps the awful knowledge as well that my wickedness has

killed our child! Oh, Mollie,' Sir Fitzroy goes on, falling on his knees by Robin's bed, 'as you hope to be forgiven, grant me the mercy I crave for! give me some hope for the future. If Robin could speak, if he were old enough to understand, he would plead with you for me, his miserable father: for forgiveness for me before I go away for ever. Let him plead for me now, as you pray that his precious life may be spared to you, Mollie!' And Sir Fitzroy bursts out crying: he can't help it, he is so miserable.

Mollie's face begins to work convulsively; it is evident that a very hard struggle is going on in her heart; then with a quick thought she remembers

'A virtuous and a Christian-like conclusion,
To pray for them that have done scathe to us.'

She feels that to 'err is human, to forgive divine;' she may need the same mercy herself some day, as no human being is faultless; and if divine forgiveness is Fitzroy's,

as assuredly it will be, he being repentant, Mollie knows that she must not, nay, has no wish to, withhold her forgiveness also.

So she turns to her husband, and going up to him, says :

'You must not go away, for I forgive you fully and freely, Fitzroy, as I hope for forgiveness myself.'

Sir Fitzroy catches her to his heart, and for the first time for long days Mollie feels her husband's kisses upon her lips. So by the side of little Robin peace is restored to his father and mother.

Then the others return, and take up their watch with Mollie and Sir Fitzroy by Robin's bed.

Many days pass away, and many weary nights of alternate hope and despair. Robin makes a gallant fight for his life, and the good doctor wrestles, inch by inch, with the foe, who wants their darling. And God hears their prayers. One happy, never-to-be-forgotten day, little Robin is

restored to consciousness once more. For hours they have all watched by his bedside, in speechless anxiety. Just when the day breaks, the little fellow opens his eyes, and looks at his mother, with sense once more and knowledge in their expression. Mollie pillows his head upon her bosom, covers him with kisses, and calls him by every endearing name that is comprised in that wonderful dictionary a mother's language to her child.

Sir Fitzroy bends over Robin with tears of heartfelt joy and thankfulness, for by Robin's recovery the awful burden of remorse is lifted from his soul: he has not been the cause of his child's death; the agony which assuredly must have bereft him of his senses is mercifully spared him. The lesson has been a sharp and awful one, but it bears good fruit; and to the day of his death Sir Fitzroy is an altered man.

As for Clifford, Lord Mark, and Vivi-

enne, their joy knows no bounds when the sweet child-life is restored, when they know that once more tiny feet will wander into paths of untold mischief; once more merry sounds will echo through the silent nurseries; once more loving words from cheery baby lips will gladden all their hearts; once more a lovely child's face, with sweet, serious eyes, and dimpled cheeks all radiant with laughter, will meet their eager gaze, morning, noon, and night; for the autocrat, king, and ruler of the nursery and their hearts is spared to them: 'King Pet' will resume the sceptre in his kingdom, and Robin L'Estrange, as of old, will reign paramount in their hearts and lives.

Once the child begins to get better, his recovery is very rapid, and in a short time he can run about and enjoy himself as well as ever. Sir Fitzroy has never seen Circe again; the letters she has sent him he has returned unopened, and complete as her

empire was over him, it is now as entirely vanished as if it had never existed.

Circe's rage is unbounded when at last she is forced to acknowledge that her revenge is not accomplished, and never will be, the only result of her wickedness being that she has restored Fitzroy to Mollie, to the woman who has every right to his love, where she had none; and this time Mollie holds and plays the winning card. Therefore Circe, defeated, leaves London, and goes abroad, bent upon finding, as speedily as may be, fresh victims, for the line she will throw out to them very skilfully baited; of that we may be sure, for, as Gay says:

> 'What gudgeons are we men,
> Every woman's easy prey!
> Though we've felt the hook again,
> We bite, and they betray.'

And Circe Dysart, being what she is, beautiful, rich, unscrupulous, and absolutely unprincipled and reckless, so long as

she gains her own ends—and to attain them she stops at nothing—will never want men fools enough to go headlong to their doom, as Sir Fitzroy did, provided she shares that fate with them.

CHAPTER XII.

HOME THEY BROUGHT HER WARRIOR DEAD.

'A little longer yet, and angel voices
Shall ring in heavenly chant upon thine ear;
Angels and saints await thee, and God needs thee;
Belov'd, can we bid thee linger here?'

A. PROCTER.

'And as the tumbling waters o'er him rolled,
All faint, to heaven he throws his dying eyes,
And "Oh! protect my wife and child," he cries.
The gushing stream rolls back the unfinished sound,
He gasps, and sinks amid the vast profound.'

FALCONER.

WHEN Robin has been convalescent some little time Dr. Brookes advises Mollie to take him to the seaside to complete his cure by an entire change of air. The small tyrant is delighted at the prospect, and manifests his delight in every possible

manner. Sundry garments of stout blue serge are provided for him, and one day, in possession of a cartload of luggage, which embraces spades and baskets, nets and tin boxes, in which Robin hopes to imprison many a luckless crab and shrimp, they duly arrive at Folkestone.

Sir Fitzroy has taken a house on the Lees, and Vivienne and Norman, with Mignonne and Lord Mark, partake there of his hospitality. The weather is lovely, and the air speedily restores the roses to Robin's face. Mollie has not been so contented for a long time, certainly not since Geoffrey's death; she becomes quite blooming again, and is more like the Mollie that Geoffrey loved so well than she has been since her marriage.

At Folkestone her days are spent in the society of those she cares for most in the world. Sir Fitzroy is altered and penitent; Circe's day is over; their debts and money difficulties are past; a secretaryship

has been found by Norman for Sir Fitzroy, and he will enter upon his new duties when they go back to London; and Robin's life is spared. So Mollie has just cause for thankfulness. They have been at Folkestone about a week.

'Will you come and bathe to-morrow, Mark?' asks Sir Fitzroy one evening; 'it will be almost the last day, for it is getting too late for bathing.'

'Yes,' answers Lord Mark; 'with pleasure. You are a good swimmer, are you not, Fitzroy?'

'Pretty fair,' replies Sir Fitzroy; 'nothing wonderful.'

'The worst of Folkestone,' says Lord Mark, 'is that the undercurrent is so strong, particularly dangerous to people who do not know all about it; the churchyard here is full of graves of drowned people.'

'What a lively conversation!' says Vivienne; 'do let's talk of something else.

You give me a creepy feeling down my back that is highly unpleasant.'

Laughingly Lord Mark and Sir Fitzroy comply with her wishes, and in pleasant talk and sweet music the evening passes swiftly away. Norman is tired, and goes off early to bed, and Mollie and Vivienne retire to Mollie's room, for one of those long, cosy, comforting talks dear to the hearts of the fair sex.

Sir Fitzroy and Lord Mark are left alone in their glory. The evenings are beginning to get a little chilly, so a cheery fire which is burning in the smoking-room is an addition to their comfort, ordered by Mollie's forethought, that they much appreciate. A tray well supplied with various bottles and glasses and pipes and cigars give the two gentlemen all that the heart of man, unreasonable thing as that is, can possibly desire; and attired in smoking suits of desirable colours and materials, they express themselves quite happy and satisfied.

This in itself, where men are concerned, is a state of things so rare that it is a matter for most sincere congratulation.

'How good Mollie has been to me, has she not, Mark?' suddenly asks Sir Fitzroy, breaking the silence by his question.

'Indeed she has!' answers Lord Mark; 'but when was Lady L'Estrange otherwise than good? She has acted exactly as I felt sure she would from the first.'

'God bless her for it!' answers Sir Fitzroy, with tears in his eyes. 'If she had cast me off, as she might well have done, for a quarter of the provocation she received from me the insolence I showed her, the insults I heaped upon her, what would have become of me? Nothing was left to me but a life of sin and misery; I should have been lost body and soul!'

'That you certainly would!' assents Lord Mark, 'but all that is happily past; it can never recur again.'

'No, it cannot,' answers Sir Fitzroy

gratefully; 'the very danger I have escaped makes that quite impossible. If I live, I will show Mollie what my opinion of her worth and excellence is; I will strive to make her as happy as she deserves to be.'

'I am sure you will,' responds Lord Mark warmly. 'Lady L'Estrange is so sweet and good that she would reclaim any man, no matter how hardened.'

'I have never thanked you, Mark,' continues Sir Fitzroy, in a voice broken by sheer emotion, 'for all you did for me that night. Had it not been for you, I should have eloped with Mrs. Dysart, and too late have repented of my insanity. You acted a true friend's part, that not one man in a hundred could or would have done. I have always wished to thank you, but somehow words seem all too poor to express what one feels on such an occasion, and for such a friend as you are, Mark.'

'I don't want thanks,' replies Lord

Mark, turning his head away so that Sir Fitzroy shall not see his face; 'all I want is that you and Lady L'Estrange shall be happy; and then if you will let me help you at all times in any way I can, and be with you often, I shall be happy also. You know,' he adds apologetically, 'I look upon Robin as my heir, so I feel I must look after him constantly.'

'You will marry some day,' answers Sir Fitzroy.

'Never,' briefly responds Lord Mark.

There is a silence between the two for some time after Lord Mark's last speech; both seem to be thinking deeply as they smoke in comfortable quietness and repose.

'Mark,' suddenly says Sir Fitzroy, 'I want you to promise me one thing.'

'What is it?' asks Lord Mark, recovering himself with an effort from his reverie.

'This: if anything happens to me, and you are still alive, that you will look after Mollie and Robin always?'

'I will; I promise it,' says Lord Mark solemnly.

'And to do that you must make me one other promise,' continues Sir Fitzroy. 'If Mollie becomes a widow, you must marry her, and make up to her for all the unhappiness I have caused her. Will you, Mark?'

Lord Mark has risen, and is standing looking out of the window far away to the horizon.

It is a splendid moonlight night: a moon ray sheds its lovely light across the sea just where Lord Mark is looking; and coming towards it is a little boat rowed by two men. He watches the boat, sent along by swift strokes; 'she walks the waters like a thing of life:' the darkness is left behind, and in a second the boat glides along the line of light. Lit up by the silver rays, and beautiful exceedingly, she glides on; then the line of light is crossed, and she disappears again on her way to the pier.

'Won't you do as I ask?' pleads Sir Fitzroy, who has risen also; and as he speaks he puts his hand with an imploring gesture on Lord Mark's shoulder.

Lord Mark turns; and looking Sir Fitzroy full in the face, he makes answer:

'If things should ever be as you say, I will do as you ask.'

'That is a comfort to me,' answers Sir Fitzroy.

Then he grasps Lord Mark's hands in a cordial clasp, and so they ratify their bargain.

'I have always thought you were the man Mollie ought to have married,' says Sir Fitzroy. 'Anyway, whatever happens, I know Mollie and Robin will never lack a friend and protector while you live. God bless you, old fellow!' And Sir Fitzroy turns away, opens the door, and walks quickly upstairs.

'What can have possessed Fitzroy this evening?' muses Lord Mark, when he finds

himself alone. 'Anyhow, it is late; wondering won't help me, so I will go to bed also.' And turning out the lamps, Lord Mark follows his host's example.

Next morning is as lovely a day as anyone can wish. A soft, balmy air, with enough breeze to make people realize that they are at the sea, and that the ozone they are imbibing would be most salutary in its effects upon them. About half-past nine Sir Fitzroy appeared. He kissed his wife tenderly, kissed Robin also, and waving his hand to Mollie, who was standing at the top of the stairs ready to go down to her breakfast, he shouted:

'I shall be back in half an hour. Goodbye, darling!' He ran down the steps on to the beach, to where Lord Mark was waiting for him.

Mollie gazed after him wistfully, as long as he was in sight, and then slowly proceeded to the dining-room.

Three-quarters of an hour have elapsed.

Mollie is still in the dining-room, reading as she finishes her breakfast, when the door opens and Vivienne comes in. Her face is as white as a sheet; her knees tremble so much that they can hardly support her.

As she enters Mollie looks up, when her eyes fall upon Vivienne's troubled face, she springs to her feet.

'Good heavens!' she exclaims. 'What is it? What has happened, Vivienne?'

'There has been an accident,' she continues.

Vivienne bends her head. Her tongue refuses its office; she cannot speak the words that will make Mollie desolate.

'Who is it?' asks Mollie, in a harsh, unnatural voice. 'Is it Lord Mark? It cannot be Fitzroy. He was here a few minutes ago. He is not dead? Ah! say it is not him!' she implores wildly. Then seeing the tears streaming down Vivienne's cheeks, she exclaims wildly: 'Ah, my

God! I see it all! It is Fitzroy; and he is dead!' And Mollie throws her arms above her head, and falls prone upon the floor in a dead faint.

Clifford comes hurrying in, weeping bitterly, followed by Norman, and they carry Mollie into the drawing-room and apply all sorts of restoratives, while the servants run for the doctor.

An hour elapses before Mollie recovers consciousness and she struggles back to life. Just as she does so the sound of measured feet breaks the silence which reigns over the house, and reverent hands and quiet footsteps bear to the room where he and Lord Mark had talked far on into the day that has brought about such a dire catastrophe all that is mortal of Sir Fitzroy L'Estrange.

Before anyone can stop her, Mollie rushes from the room into the one where her husband lays, and throwing herself down by his dead body, she takes his

hands in hers; she calls to him to come back to her, in tones of piteous entreaty; she presses again and again her warm mouth to his ice-cold lips.

In that supreme moment all he has made her suffer, all the wretchedness of her married life until the last short weeks, is quite forgotten. All she remembers is that he was her first love, the man who taught her to care for him so much, and that he is the father of her child.

Such are women! In sorrow and trouble they forget the injuries and sufferings they have endured at the hands of the man who lies dead before them; they only recall the good. The evil is as if it had never been, so noble are they, so forgiving!

At last, exhausted by emotion, Mollie allows Lord Mark to lead her away from the sad room. Then she insists upon knowing how it all happened. In broken accents, with every sign of genuine grief

—which, indeed, he really feels—Lord Mark tells them all the fatal story.

'We went down to the beach together,' he says, in a strained, unnatural voice; 'the machines were all full, and Fitzroy would not wait: he insisted upon walking lower down the shore towards Sandgate, just opposite where the flight of wooden steps end. There we undressed, and jumped into the sea. For some minutes all went well, and Fitzroy seemed to enjoy himself thoroughly, swimming and floating. I was a little ahead of him, when suddenly I heard a cry, and turning quickly round, I saw Fitzroy throw his arms up above his head, and then sink. I reached him very quickly, shouting for help as I swam; but when I got to the spot, I could not see him anywhere. I dived several times, and at last found him. The undercurrent was fearfully strong, and I think I should have been drowned also if a boat had not seen us, and come

up just as I felt I could hold up no longer. They lifted me into the boat exhausted; but,' and Lord Mark breaks down completely, 'he was quite dead: cramp had killed him. I would have given my life for his,' he continues fervently.

'I know you would,' replies Mollie.

Then they leave her to Vivienne's care and Clifford's; and as Robin creeps into the room to his mother, with a great awe and wonder upon his face, Mollie clasps him to her heart. Then mercifully 'like summer tempest comes her tears,' and as she realized that the words had been spoken which made her a widow and Robin fatherless, she felt that 'My child, I live for thee,' must for the future more than ever be the duty, the pleasure of her life in the sad days to come.

CHAPTER XIII.

FIDELIS.

'Perhaps in some long twilight hour,
Like those we have known of old,
When past shadows gather round you,
And your present friends grow cold,
You may stretch your hands out towards me—
Ah! you will—I know not when—
I shall nurse my love, and keep it
Faithfully for you, till then.'

A. PROCTER.

'Wait: my faith is large in Time,
And that which shapes it to some perfect end.'

TENNYSON.

THEY bury Sir Fitzroy at Earlston, by the side of the Patriarch and Geoff, on a soft October day. As Mollie turns away from her husband's grave, a sense of unutterable loneliness sweeps over her. She feels

quite desolate; for though she has suffered so much from loneliness and regret, yet she misses the sight of her husband's familiar face, and the sound of his voice about the house.

Mollie goes back to Kensington to pack up her property, and then takes up her abode in a small house near Earlston. She has enough to live upon with economy. Clifford, of course, remains with her.

For a long time Mollie cannot settle to anything; the shock of Sir Fitzroy's death has been so awful, that it is not easy for her to recover from it. Her only visitors are Vivienne and Lord Mark. She cannot shut her doors to him—he is such an old and constant friend; and as Vivienne is always with her when he comes to see her, ill-natured tongues are silenced.

The winter, spring, and summer after Sir Fitzroy's death pass quickly away. Mollie often sits for hours recalling the past and all she has gone through; it does

not seem possible that so much can have happened to her. She has loved, and she has lost; what will the future hold for her?

Lord Mark is as tender and chivalrous as ever in his devotion to her, as he is one of those rare men, to be appreciated when found, 'who love for years, and love but one.' From the first moment when he picked up the fragments of Mollie's fan, the day of her presentation, the world has only held one woman for him, and that woman is Mollie L'Estrange. Now the much-longed-for prize may be his. He often sees Mollie, as he looks after her interests generally, and Robin particularly.

The year has passed since Sir Fitzroy's death. October has got on its bravest array of red and yellow leaves, of hedges jewelled with hips and haws, of masses of 'traveller's joy' and dying bracken; the earth smells moist, the days are short; the squirrels are hiding away safely in their snug little homes, the robins are re-

splendent in their pretty brown dresses, with smart crimson waistcoats; the sheep and the cows are driven home early; the leaves lay in heaps upon the ground; soon Winter will fling her sparkling, brilliant mantle of pure white snow over this fair world of ours.

Already Robin is rejoicing in anticipation over the snowballing, the slides upon the slippery ice, the flying along over its clear surface in a chair, well wrapped up to brave the cold, which Lord Mark has promised him, weather permitting, shall be his winter amusement. Not to anyone else would Mollie trust her darling; she would have cheerful visions of broken ice, little dead boys, and a few other pleasant horrors, if anyone but Lord Mark had proposed these expeditions; but somehow, when he makes any of his somewhat startling proposals, they seem to become quite feasible and pleasant—indeed, are ways of passing the time for boys much to be de-

sired. What a glamour love lends to everything!

As the days go by, Mollie feels more and more lonely; she needs Lord Mark more than ever. She is only happy when she is with him; away from him she is restless and unhappy.

And at last Mollie, with her blushing face hidden in her hands, ceases to keep up the farce any longer; she knows, and bravely acknowledges to herself, that she loves Mark Champion with every atom of love that such a deep, intense nature as hers is capable of.

Mollie thinks it all over—every incident that has happened since they first met—and above all she recalls the day when for the first and last time he kissed her; for which act, for many weary weeks, she banished him from her presence. No kiss she has ever had has caused her the same sensations as that one; for by it Mollie knew that she loved, and that she

was loved, almost worshipped, in return; by that kiss she felt that her life, her soul, her existence, had recognised the master who would turn her life into joy unutterable, bliss unequalled, or into grief that would be unbearable.

Which would it be? Now that such thoughts were no wrong, Mollie indulged in them to the full, as much as before, though she felt their existence and power over her, she had sternly put them away.

At last, one day the end of October, Lord Mark could stand the suspense no longer. Mollie was so sweet and lovely, that it was certain, unless she elected to remain a widow, that she would have plenty of men eager to marry her.

Lord Mark might lose his darling after all. This thought flashes over him like a revelation; no sooner does it come to appal him by its possibility, than he resolves to start for Mollie's abode, his mind made up—

'To win or lose it all.'

No sooner said than done. Half-an-hour later sees him at the station; another hour finds him safe with Mollie.

Vivienne, who was in the drawing-room, after a judicious interval discreetly retires, taking Robin with her, much to his disgust, as he looks upon Lord Mark as his own particular property, and likes to monopolize him completely in consequence.

However, this time, Master Robin, it must be 'plâce aux dames.'

Vivienne goes off, chuckling softly to herself, to consult with Clifford.

Vivienne all along has foreseen what would happen, and has known Mark's feelings, and, moreover, guessed Mollie's pretty accurately, and has fully appreciated their self-control and high principles; but now she thinks that Lord Mark has waited long enough—it is his turn now; she knows he has never cared for anyone but Mollie, and she is quite determined to give them every chance of coming to an

understanding, which event she devoutly hopes will take place 'this very day.'

'Clifford,' says Vivienne, 'we shall have a wedding very shortly;' and she adds, with a mysterious nod of her pretty head: 'I have left them alone downstairs.'

'I agree with you ma'am,' says Clifford; 'all I can say is, I for one shall be delighted. What's past cannot be altered: her ladyship deserves to be happy after all she has gone through.'

'And that,' says Vivienne, 'will only —can only—come to her by a marriage with Lord Mark—of that I feel sure.'

'So do I,' answers Clifford; 'anyone can see how devoted he is to her ladyship. He deserves her, and she deserves him: they are just suited to each other.'.

So these two continue their talk, each pleased with the way they have arranged everything, and thus they both talk on and possess their souls in patience until they know the result.

Meanwhile, Lord Mark, downstairs, is doing his best to make their agreeable prophecies come true.

The moment Mollie looked at him when he arrived, she saw that there was a new light in his expressive face—a look of radiant happiness, a suppressed impatience, that had not been there the last time they had met.

As she looks, Mollie gets rosy red, and attempts to avoid his gaze. But a stronger will than hers compels her to look again, in spite of herself, and raising sweet eyes to his, she sees that the look of happiness becomes more and more distinct. Lord Mark takes her by the hand, and makes her sit down on the comfortable sofa which is drawn up on one side of the fireplace.

The room is lovely, with all its old furniture; the fire burns brightly, the lamps shed a pleasant light over all, and the gleams from them play about the crinkles

and waves of Mollie's pretty hair, and hide themselves lovingly in the depths of her beautiful eyes.

'Mollie,' at last says Lord Mark, sitting down on the sofa by her, 'I have come here to ask you a question, and to find out if you are willing to redeem a promise I made Fitzroy the night before he died. Will you answer my question?'

'Yes,' whispers Mollie, very low.

'Will you marry me, Mollie darling?' whispers Lord Mark, very eagerly; 'will you make me the happiest man in the world? I have loved you, and you only, from the first time my eyes ever rested upon your dear face. I have had no thought but you, sweet Mollie, from that day; no hope, since you became a widow, but that of winning you for my own, for my darling and cherished wife, my sole earthly treasure! You are the only creature I ever have or ever can care for; in your love is my heaven; in your refusal my

utter despair. Say, Mollie darling, will you have me for your husband?'

And Lord Mark looks at Mollie with the look of a man pleading for that which he values more than life: the love of the one woman whose love he cares for beyond the power of words to describe.

Mollie looks at him at first shyly, then boldly; what she sees in his face seems to please her, for she answers, as she puts her hand in his:

'I will marry you, Mark, and I do love you better than all the world.'

'My darling, my queen, my one sweetheart!' murmurs Lord Mark, in raptures. 'Thank God I have lived to see this day, and to hear you say that you love me!'

And Lord Mark folds Mollie in his eager arms, draws her bright head on to his shoulder, and kisses again and again, with joy untold, the lips which so willingly meet his, and give themselves to him once and for ever. Long do they sit there revelling

in the complete joy of this new state of things. Then Lord Mark tells Mollie all about Sir Fitzroy's wishes, and his promise.

'How wonderful,' says Mollie, 'that he should have made you promise to marry me;' and, with a touch of her old mischief: 'supposing I had refused to marry you, sir?'

'Then,' answers Lord Mark, 'there would have been a long paragraph in the *Morning Post*, detailing my numerous virtues and my early demise, for I should have sought for consolation in the calm but dirty Thames. But, sweet one, you could not be so cruel.'

And Lord Mark looks at Mollie with such a perfectly satisfied air, that there is nothing left for her to do but to accept the situation gracefully, which accordingly she does, and is rewarded by Lord Mark with many kisses, which she seems to thoroughly appreciate.

After a long time, with much tapping of

high-heeled boots as she walks down the oak stairs, and great slamming of doors, Vivienne appears.

'Dear me! good people,' she observes blandly, 'are you aware that dinner will be ready in about ten minutes, and that I, for one, am frightfully hungry?'

'So am I,' smiles Lord Mark; 'but before we go down, let me tell you something that I hope you will approve of. Mollie——'

'Is going to marry you,' interrupts Vivienne. 'Hurrah! hurrah!' and she begins embracing Mollie and then Lord Mark, and dancing about the room as if she were quite mad.

'Well, there is no doubt as to your approbation,' laughs Lord Mark, when he can speak for laughing at the quaint figure she presents.

'I should think not,' she retorts; 'it is the best thing I ever heard in my life. I must call Clifford and Robin.' This she

accordingly does, and they are equally delighted.

'Mother may marry you,' observes King Pet; 'I like you. You will take me on the ice, and play horses, and give me a pony, won't you, Mark?' and Robin slides a somewhat black hand confidingly into Mark's.

'I should think I would!' says Lord Mark; 'you shall have whatever you like, my pet.'

So Robin approves of Lord Mark more than ever; and forthwith proceeds to announce his intention of sitting up to dinner, taking the precaution of announcing his wishes to Lord Mark, sure beforehand of his desires being granted, which they are promptly.

The dinner is very cheery—the happiest one Lord Mark has ever assisted at; for at it are the cousin in the future that he is devoted to, the woman he loves better than his life, who has promised to be his,

the child who, dear to him already, will become doubly so now; and there also is the faithful, excellent, kind Clifford, who has stayed with, helped, and sympathized with his darling in all her troubles, for whom Lord Mark has the truest liking and respect. No wonder he feels that God has indeed been good to him. But—

> 'The book is completed,
> And closed, like the day;
> And the hand that has written it
> Lays it away;'

and—

> 'Song sinks into silence:
> The story is told.'

So we will leave these dear ones in a safe harbour after all their perils.

As Mollie stands by the window that night with Lord Mark, after Vivienne has gone to bed, she says softly:

'There is only one person wanting to my complete happiness, and then it would be too perfect—there would be nothing left to be desired.'

'Who is that?' asks Lord Mark softly.

His arm is round Mollie: she has nestled into his embrace; and, as he asks the question, he kisses her hair and eyes with tender kisses. And Mollie, from the safe haven of his arms, makes answer:

'The person I want is Geoff. If he were only here'!

'Ah!' says Lord Mark, in reverent tones; 'how happy he would be if he could see us now, my darling! He was the best man that ever breathed. I cared for him more than I ever did for anyone in the world, or ever shall, except you, my Mollie.

'"For I love you, Mollie darling,
You are all the world to me!"'

And Lord Mark sings in his rich, sweet tones. 'One question still,

'"Do you love me Mollie, darling?
Let your answer be a kiss;"'

which Mollie gladly gives him.

Thus, secure and happy in their love for each other, Lord Mark views his future life with gratitude and intense thankfulness; for it will be passed with Robin and 'Mollie darling.'

THE END.

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